

A STORY OF ATTICA

*A quick primer on the Attica Prison Rebellion of 1971
in honor of the 40th anniversary of the uprising,
September 9-13, 2011*

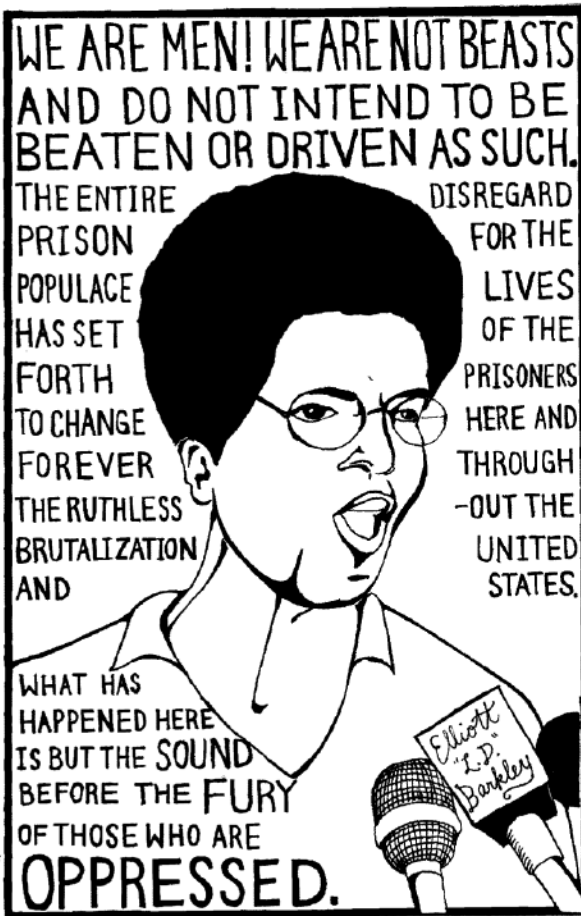


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INTRODUCTION

There are so many roots to the tree of anger/that sometimes the branches shatter/before they bear.

— Audre Lorde

What has happened here is but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed.

— Declaration to the People of America by Attica prisoners, September 9, 1971

THE EVENT

From September 9 to 13, 1971, prisoners took control of the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York, motivated by a series of abuses as well as anger over the recent murder of Black Panther activist George Jackson in San Quentin prison. The prisoners made a series of demands to prison administrators and held about 40 people as hostages. After four days of fruitless negotiations and without meeting with prisoners, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered that the prison be retaken by force; 39 people were killed in a 15-minute assault by state police. The New York State Special Commission on Attica (also known as the McKay Commission) appointed to investigate the uprising stated that “with the exception of Indian massacres in the late 19th century, the State Police assault which ended the four-day prison uprising was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War.” On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Attica Rebellion, Project NIA decided to make a ‘zine and create an event series commemorating the rebellion.

THE BACKGROUND

In September 1971 at Attica Prison, there were over 2,200 people locked up in a facility built to accommodate 1,600. 54% of those prisoners were Black and 9% were identified as Puerto Rican. 40% of the prisoners were under the age of 30. One out of 398 correctional officers was Latino and all of the prison administrators were white. It cost \$8 million dollars to run Attica Prison in fiscal year 1971-72; that amounted to about \$8,000 per prisoner. Most of this money was spent on correctional officers’ salaries (62%). Inmates at Attica spent 14 to 16 hours a day in their 6 by 9 foot cells.

Attica had been on a slow boil throughout the summer of 1971. In June 1971, five Attica prisoners established the Attica Liberation Faction (ALF). Carl Jones-EL, one of the five founders, suggested that the ALF was created “to try to bring about some change in the conditions of Attica. We started teaching political ideology to ourselves. We read Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Malcolm X, de Bois, Frederick

Douglass and a lot of others. We tried a reform program on ourselves first before we started making petitions and so forth. We would hold political classes on weekends and point out that certain conditions were taking place and the money that was being made even though we weren't getting the benefits."¹

On September 8th 1971, two prisoners were roughhousing in the Attica Prison yard. They were ordered by correctional officers to stop. An altercation ensued involving a few prisoners and guards. There is some confusion about what exactly happened during this incident. Regardless, later in the day, two prisoners were accompanied by guards to the infamous "box" in Housing Block Z (HBZ). Attica prisoners had heard stories about what happened to people taken to segregation and none of what they heard was pretty. Stories of abuse, brutality and torture circulated; the guards did nothing to disabuse prisoners of these ideas.

It seems that one of the prisoners who were targeted for confinement at HBZ hadn't even been involved in the original melee. His fellow inmates were furious at this perceived injustice. The next day, a correctional officer named Robert Curtiss who had been involved in the previous day's incident was overpowered by a group of prisoners in retaliation. This sparked the most well-known prison uprising of the 20th century.

THE ORGANIZERS

The group known as the Attica Liberation Faction did not instigate the riots that led to the Attica Rebellion, but they quickly stepped in to help negotiate the prisoners' demands and organize prisoners' anger into a platform. The five founders were Frank Lott (who took on the title of Chairman), Donald Noble, Carl Jones-EL, Herbert X. Blyden, and Peter Butler.

Lee Bernstein (2010) provides some background about the founders of the ALF:

"These five – Frank Lott, Herbert X. Blyden, Donald Noble, Carl Jones-EL, and Peter Butler – were among the most experienced activists in Attica. Blyden had participated in a rebellion at the Tombs prison in New York City the previous year, helping to write the rebels' list of demands. Others had been involved in a sit-down strike at Auburn prison. Blyden is credited with demanding that the prisoners be transported to a nonimperialist country as a condition of ending the takeover. While deemed impractical by one of the outside observers, this demand grew logically from the political education many inmates received while in prison. Blyden and Jones served on the negotiating committee during the takeover. Blyden was a member of Attica's Nation of Islam community, and Carl Jones-EL and Donald Noble were members of the prison's Moorish Science community. (Bernstein, p.67-68)"

1 *Voices From Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners* (1972).

During that summer, prisoners at Attica launched peer-led classes in sociology. This was preceded by the formation of several study and discussion groups led by prisoners who had affiliations with the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords and the Five Percenters. Carl Jones-EL explains:

“The education department, the school system that they have, it only goes so far, far as trying to give a man an education. We more or less have to educate ourselves. When we came here [Attica] we knew the conditions and we felt that people should come together and get a better understanding of the conditions here, what was being did to them by the administration. So behind this we would hold meetings in the yard. We’d hold open house and whoever wanted to come and listen to our political ideology were welcome. We didn’t bar anyone. This was frowned upon by the institution and they would break it up. If we congregated too big, this wasn’t allowed. In order to reach everyone, we had to set up some sort of communications. We had to get along with the different factions here: the Muslims, the Fiver Per-centers, and all the other factions to become one solid movement, rather than just be separate parts here trying to accomplish the same things, better conditions for the inmates².”

These informal gatherings provided a forum for prisoners to debate and discuss the social and political issues of the day. The McKay Commission found that these prisoner-created spaces politicized and radicalized inmates and contributed to a series of protests in the summer of 1971.

In July 1971, the Attica Liberation Faction presented a list of 27 demands to Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller. This list of demands was based on the Folsom Prisoners’ Manifesto, which had been crafted in support of a November 1970 prisoner strike in California. Carl Jones-EL offered this description of the genesis of the manifesto and the prisoner’s motivations:

“We wanted to do things, let’s say, diplomatically. We were seeking reform. Although, many were not in favor of reform, because they didn’t believe that the people would listen. So, five of us had gotten together. This is how we started. We met in the yard and we’d draw up drafts as to proposals we should make. And we sought support from the entire population, the four different blocks. And the only way we could accomplish this was that by us not being able to see everyone in different blocks, we, more or less, had to get on the traveling list. In other words, if you were a baseball, a football, a softball official, and you were in a position to travel and get around to different blocks. So we did this. One of us would go to different blocks, and there we would set

2 Edited transcription of separate interviews with nine of those the prison administration had isolated as “leaders” of the rebellion taken from interviews conducted by Bruce Soloway of Pacifica Radio, WBAI, in February 1972. In “We Are Attica: Interviews with Prisoners from Attica” published by the Attica Defense Committee.

up an educational program, and bring to their attention what the manifesto was going to be about. So we got a lot of support on this. Then we moved on it. Everyone was not in favor of signing their names to it though, because they didn't want to spotlight themselves. So five of us did³.”

Commissioner Oswald did not act on the demands. Instead the warden of Attica, Vincent Mancusi, responded “by increasing the frequency of cell searches, censoring all references to prison conditions from news sources, and announcing that there would be no prizes awarded to the winners of the upcoming Labor Day sporting competitions (Bernstein, p. 69).”

The next month, August 1971, Black Panther activist George Jackson was killed by correctional officers at San Quentin Prison. His killing sparked protests including work stoppages at prisons across the U.S. At Attica, the different prisoner factions, who had previously found it difficult to unify in order to strengthen the likelihood that their demands would be enacted, were mobilized by the killing of Jackson. Donald Noble, one of the founders of the Attica Liberation Faction, explained it this way:

“What really solidified things was George Jackson’s death. This had a reaction on the people, one that we were trying to accomplish all along, to bring the people together. We thought, ‘How can we pay tribute to George Jackson?’ because a lot of us idolized him and things that he was doing and things that he was exposing about the system. So, we decided that we would have a silent fast that whole day in honor of him. We would wear black armbands. No one was to eat anything that whole day. We noted that if the people could come together for this, then they could come together for other things⁴.”

THE OUTCOMES

The Attica Rebellion came on the tail of the non-violent protests following Jackson’s killing. The demands that developed out of the rebellion were different than those advanced by the Attica Liberation Front, but there was some overlap. Five initial demands became “15 Practical Points,” points of unity that formed the basis for prisoners’ negotiations with the prison system. Rather than ending in a negotiated agreement, however, the events at Attica concluded in a massacre by state forces. Guards held hostage in the prison were murdered alongside prisoners. In the long term, the Attica Rebellion did result in an investigation into the event, and increased awareness about prison conditions and abuses. The voices of those in Attica were lifted up, but this attention ultimately came at a very dear price — the lives of 43 people.

³ Edited transcription of separate interviews with nine of those the prison administration had isolated as “leaders” of the rebellion taken from interviews conducted by Bruce Soloway of Pacifica Radio, WBAL, in February 1972. In “We Are Attica: Interviews with Prisoners from Attica” published by the Attica Defense Committee.

⁴ Donald Noble, interview, in *Prisons on Fire: George Jackson, Attica, and Black Liberation*, audio CD (San Francisco: Freedom Archives, 2001).



"It's an awful scene...people are dying in there. I'm going to cut this off. I'm upset [feed cuts, then returns]. It is unfortunate what has happened here. After the situation here at Attica, the penal system in the United States and the people who are kept inside of them will never be the same."



WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS NOW?

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Attica Prison revolt, we felt that it was a good time to both reflect on the conditions that precipitated the rebellion and to examine its legacy. First and foremost, we want to honor those who gave their lives to this struggle then, and those who continue to give their lives now. We want to honor those currently incarcerated, to whom this struggle belongs today. Many of the most heroic stories of resistance and radical organizing are still unknown to us, but Attica is a piece of the history of resistance that has thankfully been well documented.

The situation of incarceration today is both similar and different to the situation when the Attica Rebellion occurred. In 1970, there were 48,497 people in federal and state prisons⁵ in the U.S. By 2009, there were 1,613,740⁶ million individuals locked up in our federal and state prisons. This exponential growth of the prison population means that the events of Attica are as relevant today as they were in 1971, perhaps even more so. While some reforms in conditions have been enacted in some places, the numbers of people incarcerated have shifted drastically; poor people and people of color are consistently targeted for incarceration. Incarceration has become a big business, bringing in profits to private companies through lucrative contracts and through “employing” prisoners at low or no wages. . A whole slew of abuses continue, including long term solitary confinement, group punishments for individual actions, denial of health services, shackling of pregnant women in prison, and routine verbal and physical harassment and abuse, especially of women, youth, Muslims, queer and trans people, and other members of marginalized groups within prisons.

During the last year, separate prison strikes and protests have started and spread statewide in Georgia, California and Indiana. In Georgia, a statewide strike in December 2010 demanded fair wages for prisoners and pointed out that prisoners’ unpaid labor is a form of modern-day slavery. The Georgia strike, which lasted six days, also called for educational opportunities, decent health care, an end to cruel and unusual punishment, decent living conditions, nutritional meals, vocational and self-improvement opportunities, access to families, and justice in parole decisions. Georgia prisoners are now attempting to win justice through civil suits against the prison system.

In California, a July 2011 hunger strike involved nearly 7,000 people in thirteen facilities. The five core demands of the strikers asked for fair policies in punishment within prisons, an end to long-term solitary confinement, adequate food, and more programs and privileges to allow prisoners to “engage in self-help treatment, education, religious and other productive activities...”

5 Langan, Patrick A. Race of prisoners admitted to state and federal institutions, 1926-86. NCJ-125618. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (May 1991).

6 Numbers for both years 1970 and 2009 exclude the jail population.

In Indiana, an August 2011 protest was the result of a unilateral crackdown on prisoners after a single violent incident. Similar to the protest in California, prisoners demanded that large groups not be punished for the actions of individuals.

Outside solidarity with these strikes and protests is one of the ways we can support current movements to reform and shut down prisons (see Resource section for more information). It is also important that we know our history, and know that prison organizing on the inside has been happening for decades.

Attica marks an important, dramatic point in our collective history and in the history of anti-prison struggles. We hope the story of Attica will inspire you to act in your own ways, and in your own communities, to fight the PIC.

With gratitude, and in solidarity,
Mariame Kaba and Lewis Wallace

DECLARATIONS, DEMANDS, AND PROPOSALS OF THE ATTICA PROTESTORS

Once the inmates of Attica Prison took over the facility on Thursday, September 9, 1971, a committee of inmates drew up five demands as preconditions to end the takeover. These five demands would be broadened into "15 practical proposals" that would form the basis for the attempted negotiations among the prisoners, the committee of outside observers, state prison officials, and representatives from the governor's office.

DECLARATION TO THE PEOPLE OF AMERICA (SEPTEMBER 9, 1971)

by The Inmates of Attica Prison, read by L.D. Barkley

The People of the United States of America: first of all we want it to be known that in the past we have had some very, very, treacherous experiences with the Department of Correction of New York State. They have promised us many things and they are giving us nothing except more of what we've already got: brutalization and murder inside this penitentiary. We do not intend to accept to allow ourselves to accept this situation again. Therefore, we have composed this declaration to the People of America to let them know exactly how we feel and what it is that they must do and what we want primarily, not what someone else wants for us. We're talking about what we want. There seems to be a little misunderstanding about why this incident developed here at Attica and this declaration here will explain the reason:

The entire incident that has erupted here at Attica is not a result of the dastardly bushwhacking of the two prisoners, September 8, 1971, but of the unmitigated oppression wrought by the racist administrative network of this prison throughout the year. We are men. We are not beasts and we do not intend to be beaten or driven as such. The entire prison populace, that means each and every one of us here, have set forth to change forever the ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States. What has happened here is but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed. We will not compromise on any terms except those terms that are agreeable to us. We've called upon all the conscientious citizens of America to assist us in putting an end to this situation that threatens the lives of not only us, but of each and every one of you, as well. We have set forth demands that will bring us closer to the reality of the demise of these prison institutions that serve no useful purpose to the people of America, but to those who would enslave and exploit the people of America.

Our demands are such:

1. We want complete amnesty, meaning freedom from all and any physical, mental and legal reprisals.
2. We want now, speedy and safe transportation out of confinement to a non-imperialistic country.
3. We demand that the Federal Government intervene, so that we will be under direct Federal Jurisdiction.
4. We want the Governor and the Judiciary, namely Constance B. Motley, to guarantee that there will be no reprisals and we want all factions of the media to articulate this.
5. We urgently demand immediate negotiations through William M. Kunstler, Attorney at Law, 588 9th Avenue, New York, New York; Assemblyman Arthur O. Eve of Buffalo; the Prisoner Solidarity Committee of New York; Minister Farrakan of the Muslims. We want Huey P. Newton from the Black Panther Party and we want the Chairman of the Young Lords Party. We want Clarence B. Jones of the Amsterdam News. We want Tom Wicker of the New York Times. We want Richard Roth from the Currier Express. We want the Fortune Society; Dave Anderson of the Urban League of Rochester; Brine Eva Barnes; We want Jim Hendling of the Democratic Late Chronicle of Detroit, Michigan. We guarantee the safe passage of all people to and from this institution. We invite all the people to come here and witness this degradation so that they can better know how to bring this degradation to an end. This is what we want.





THE 15 PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

handed to Commissioner Oswald by prisoner Jerry Rosenberg

Practical Proposals

1. Apply the New York State minimum wage law to all state institutions. STOP SLAVE LABOR.
2. Allow all New York State prisoners to be politically active, without intimidation or reprisals.
3. Give us true religious freedom.
4. End all censorship of newspapers, magazines, letters, and other publications coming from the publisher.
5. Allow all inmates, at their own expense, to communicate with anyone they please.
6. When an inmate reaches conditional release date, give him a full release without parole.
7. Cease administrative resentencing of inmates returned for parole violations.
8. Institute realistic rehabilitation programs for all inmates according to their offense and personal needs.
9. Educate all correctional officers to the needs of the inmates, i.e., understanding rather than punishment.
10. Give us a healthy diet, stop feeding us so much pork, and give us some fresh fruit daily.
11. Modernize the inmate education system.
12. Give us a doctor that will examine and treat all inmates that request treatment.
13. Have an institutional delegation comprised of one inmate from each company authorized to speak to the institution administration concerning grievances (QUARTERLY).
14. Give us less cell time and more recreation with better recreational equipment and facilities.
15. Remove inside walls, making one open yard, and no more segregation or punishment.

TIMELINE OF THE ATTICA REBELLION

compiled by Mariame Kaba from various sources

- **August 1970:** The men in Auburn prison revolt. Forty of them are transferred at Attica. At the same time a struggle begins at Attica for higher wages and lower commissary prices. It includes petitioning and later a strike by hundreds of prisoners. The struggle initially results in the alleged leaders being shipped out to other prisons and all the men in cell block “B” being locked in their cells for two weeks. It also results in commissary prices being lowered and, a short while later, in a small increase in wages.
- **October 1970:** Rebellions occur at several New York City Jails. This includes the “Tombs” where Civil Rights activist Herbert Blyden was a leader of the uprising.
- **May-June 1971:** The Attica Liberation Faction is founded by five prisoners.
- **July 2, 1971:** The Attica Liberation Faction presents 27 demands to Commissioner Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller.
- **August 21, 1971:** Black Panther leader George Jackson is killed by correctional officers at San Quentin Prison in California. They contend that they shot him as he was attempting to escape. No one believes this.
- **August 22, 1971:** A hunger strike is called at Attica in honor of George Jackson. Strikers march into the mess hall for breakfast single file, sit silently, and refuse to eat. The Commission put the number of prisoners participating in the protest at 700, out of a total population of 2,243.
- **August 30, 1971:** Three hundred prisoners sign up for sick call and occupy the hospital area to dramatize the substandard health facilities. This was the second peaceful protest at Attica in two weeks.

Frank Smith, who served on the negotiating committee during the September rebellion, describes the scene the morning after Jackson’s death: “I didn’t know anything about George Jackson. So, when we got to the mess hall that morning, everything was quiet. No one was saying nothing, and you’re talking about five, six, seven hundred people! Inmates! So, I said to my buddy, ‘What’s up, man ?’” The McKay Commission described the correctional officers’ impression of the protest as follows: “For the young correction officers who found themselves in the mess hall with 700 silent, fasting inmates wearing black armbands, the very silence and the mood of unreserved hostility was the most threatening and frightening experience in their memory. ‘I was scared shitless,’ one young officer later recalled.”

- September 2, 1971:** Commissioner Oswald visits Attica and meets briefly with Frank Lott, Chairman of the Attica Liberation Faction. Oswald asks for more time to implement demands. He leaves early due to his wife's illness and leaves behind a recorded message that is played three times over the prison public address system. Oswald's message says: "I assure you that changes will be made⁷." He asks for more time to implement the requested changes.

September 8, 1971: Early in the day, there is an altercation between correctional officers and two prisoners. Later that day, correctional officers lead two prisoners whom they believe to be responsible to Housing Block Z (HBZ), the disciplinary housing unit where inmates were locked down for twenty-three hours per day. Ray Lamorie, one of the two, had not been involved in the altercation. Observers saw officers strike Leroy Dewer, the other prisoner, while taking him to HBZ. Prisoners attest that HBZ was a site of routine, brutal beatings by correctional officers.
- September 9, 1971:** The revolt begins. Prisoners subdue Lieutenant Robert Curtis in a tunnel that divides the prison yard into quarters. A group of fifteen to twenty-five prisoners eventually overpower four guards and lock them in cells. The uprising quickly spreads to the other cell blocks, with more than 1200 prisoners congregating in Cell Block D. Although members of the Attica Liberation Front did not participate in the initial rioting, they quickly joined in to move the prisoners toward more explicit demands for reform. The prisoners create a committee to negotiate with Commissioner Oswald and demand that outside observers be present.
- September 10, 1971:** Uprising continues. 33 observers assemble at Attica and pay a brief visit to D yard.
- September 11, 1971:** Rockefeller refuses to come to Attica to aid in the negotiations. He also refuses the prisoners demand for amnesty. William Quinn, a guard held hostage, dies of head injuries. The observer committee negotiates the 28 point package with Oswald. This plan is intended to convey what the state would offer in concessions to the prisoners. However the state did not agree to the key issue of criminal amnesty. The prisoners reject the 28 points package because they did not trust the state to meet even these promises. Black Panther leader and co-founder Bobby Seale arrives at Attica. Some hope he can convince the prisoners to accept the 28 point package. Seale tells Oswald and the observers that he could not tell the prisoners what to do but that he would let them know that he would support whatever decisions they made.
- September 12, 1971:** Uprising continues. Rockefeller, again, refuses pleas of the hostages, the prisoners, Commissioner Oswald, and the Observers Committee, all asking him to come to Attica.

⁷ *A Time to Die* by Tom Wicker (1975), p. 9.

- **September 13, 1971:** Bloody Monday. Rockefeller orders thousands of National Guardsmen, State Troopers and Corrections Guards to attack the prisoners. Hundreds of prisoners are shot. The State's forces also shoot and kill nine of the hostage correctional workers. The prisoners have no guns. Many of the alleged leaders of the rebellion are selectively marked and assassinated by the State's forces. 40 men (prisoners and hostages) die in the retaking of the prison. The Corrections Department says the hostages' throats were slashed by the prisoners. Guards torture and beat prisoners

Here's how Carl Jones-EL recalls the events of September 13th:

"The thirteenth, everyone was in the yard and there was a lot of tension, because you could see that these people were getting ready to come in. They was going to use force. Now from where I was, I'm in the middle of the yard, so to speak, near the trench. Next thing I knowed there's this big helicopter flying over us and tear gas coming from everyone, and there's a whole lot of shooting and carrying on. So naturally, everyone is running for cover. So I'm next to the wall and I note that around me everyone is hiding his face and guys spitting in rags and putting it to their nose. But what I know was troopers start coming from everywhere, then I start seeing different people fall, you know, they was shot. Guys was losing their hands and shot in the head and the neck. Like it's been stated about indiscriminate firing. I don't see it as indiscriminate firing because the people that were shot, and the people that were killed, they were selected, man. How you going to call this indiscriminate? You take the troopers that came in, they wasn't hurt. Now if it was indiscriminate, why didn't some of them get hurt? You see, why was it just inmates and hostages that got shot, that got killed? At the same time the helicopter was flying overhead, the helicopter was telling everyone to surrender and they wouldn't be hurt. A lot of people were doing this and they were still getting shot. They were putting their hands up and this helicopter just kept flying around talking about surrendering and nobody would get hurt. So after everyone seen what was happening, they didn't come out. It was a slaughter like, man, the people were defenseless. They had sticks and homemade weapons to defend themselves, but this doesn't compare, man, with magnums and carbines. This is ridiculous, you know."

- **September 14 and after:** Coroner's report shows that no hostages died of slashed throats. All died of police gunshot wounds. Demonstrations protesting the Attica Massacre begin in New York and around nation. Beatings and harassment of prisoners continues. Several hundred of the rebel prisoners are shipped out to other prisons. 80 of the alleged leaders are put in 24-hour segregation. On May 1, they also are shipped out. Wyoming County Grand Jury prepares to indict prisoners for the rebellion. 62 prisoners were charged in 42 indictments with 1,289 separate counts. Only one state trooper was charged. McKay Commission, created by Rockefeller, holds hearings about Attica revolt.

THE AFTERMATH: TESTIMONIES FROM PRISONERS

Excerpts from *Voices From Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners* (1972)

NOTE: These testimonies include explicit descriptions of torture.

FRANK SMITH

Frank Smith or “Big Black” was sentenced to 10-15 years for assault, robbery and larceny and was almost up for parole at the time of the rebellion. After the prison was retaken, he was beaten and dragged upstairs to segregation. There, stark naked, he was put into a cell with only a mattress and a pillow. Guards opened all the windows. “Imagine a 250 pound man trying to squeeze under a pillow,” he commented. Guards told him, “Don’t worry if you don’t freeze to death, you’ll die another way, nigger.”

What Happened After Attica Was Retaken?

I was laying in the hallway from the gas because they shot gas in the hall, observing things outside the window shooting, death assaults and different things happening in the yard that I just came out of. The next thing I know I’m pushed out the door into the A block area and my clothes are being ripped off me. I’m on my stomach and I’m crawling across the yard.

I must have crawled for ten or fifteen minutes, then someone said, “Alright nigger, when I tell you get up, get up, and look straight ahead with your hands behind you, hear?” So the Department of Correction officers said, “That’s one of the leaders over there – that’s one of the niggers.” So another one took me.

They took me on the side of the building under the catwalk in A block yard and laid me on the table on my back. They took a football and put it under my throat and he told me if I move the football, he would kill me.

Then they started asking me if I was the one who cut the officers’ testicle out – castrated and put it in his mouth. I said, “No, I had no knowledge of this.” One or two of the civilians there said, “You did it nigger, we know you did it.”

So one says to the other, “I bet you I can shoot his testicles off.” This time I’m looking at a pistol. Another says, “No, I bet I can throw a cigarette on him and burn it off.” The other one says, “If you can get a cigarette on him I bet I can shoot it off.”

For the next two hours I was constantly used as a human ashtray and spittoon. They dropped hot shells, bullet shells on my body. I have spots on my body now that I can show you and also I have burn marks on my body – between my legs, on my legs, on my stomach.

All the while, these people are doing these things, they are constantly saying, “Big Black, you *know* you did this, we seen you do this, we had glasses on you,” while I’m constantly saying, “You know I didn’t do this – Why are you saying this to me?” Meanwhile, I’m trying to shake myself to get the cigarettes off me because I’m being burned and no one will knock them off.

So he tells me, “Don’t wipe it off or we’re going to kill you.” So he said, “Black is beautiful – *that* ain’t beautiful.” At this time I have cigars and cigarettes between my legs. The officers tell me that when I get off the table they have 60 officers standing in the hallway and I’m going to have to run through the hallway “and there’s no telling what they’re going to do to you Frank, after what you did.”

Were you medically treated at all?

They took me and lay me in the hospital, a nurse who works in the hospital said, “Yeah, nigger, if we find out you did that, I’ll feel sorry for you.” Going to and fro, he steps deliberately on my body and I was told by a state trooper if I moved he would kill me because all the time I’m laying on the floor, I’m laying on the stretcher and he has a gun in my nose. I can’t move my head. I can’t look left or right. All I can look is straight up while laying on the floor. They pput me on the x-ray table and the state trooper takes his foot and kicks me in the buttocks.

There are four or five state troopers. Now the Department of Corrections officer came in and he had two civilians with him. I’m laying down and I have my legs closed and he says, “Open your legs” and I open my legs. This state trooper took his rifle and he hit me in my testicles six or seven times. Not hard enough to make me unconscious but just enough to hurt. And this is what he is constantly doing. While he is doing this, two civilians are taking my pictures. “You’re the one who cut the officers’ testicles and put them in his mouth. Do you know we have a big surprise for you?” I don’t say nothing. “He’s a big one, he can stand it.” They got four National Guards to pick me up so they can take me upstairs.

I can see the location, I can see the death and I say I know the institution. They raised me right next to the elevator and they dumped me right on the floor. They made me crawl in the elevator on my back, on my buttocks and on my elbows. They make me get into a corner like so with my legs up against the wall. They kept on the whole while, constantly telling me that they were going to kill me.

An officer upstairs knocked my head like I was a piece of meat or an insect. He kicked me two or three times. He made me stand up but I could hardly stand up because I lost quite a bit of blood and a puddle of it was right there when he knocked me out. But I went because I was more scared than anything else because I don’t know *what’s* going to happen. I finally got up and they whipped me to my cell. One thing I have to say is that I’m not going to let them do that to me again.

Since that time I have received no physical abuse at all. Since they put me in my cell nothing but psychological harassment and so forth has continued until right now, this morning. At present, conditions are the same or worse. Each night two or three nights out of week, there is some officer somewhere who says, "Be quiet niggers and die peaceful. You're going to die niggers." Each time we come out of our cells, we have to strip and be exposed to 17 officers picking our testicles up, turning around, bending over, spreading our buttocks and officers standing behind us with gestures, laughing and snickering.

If you ask for any kind of medical assistance, you don't receive it. I have an infected eye and I've been complaining about my eye and my jaw for the longest time.

FRANK LOTT

Frank Lott had done nine years on a 50-years-to-life sentence ("I'm a modern-day Methuselah," he said) after being convicted of killing a cop. There seems to be some question about whether it was he or the cop's partner that did the shooting. He attested that no one told him that the jury that was trying him was hung – that they couldn't come to an agreement about the case. The D.A. came to him and pressured him into copping a plea by telling him how bad his chances were. So he copped the plea and it wasn't until two years later when he wrote for the transcripts of the trial that he discovered that the jury was hung. At the time of the rebellion, he had appealed six times and had been turned down but "if you stop swimming you'll drown," he said. One of the judges who heard his appeal was Mitchell Schweitzer, who later quit the bench after being suspended for taking bribes. Schweitzer, through Frank's attorneys, had asked for a \$15,000 payoff from Frank while he was sitting in his cell in prison.

What Happened After the Prison Was Retaken?

After the taking of the prison by troops and guards, we were required to strip naked. We were herded over from the D block area, barefooted. We were required to walk on the glass in the hallways, bleeding feet and all. And afterwards we were taken upstairs and we were made to run a gauntlet with guards and troopers yelling "run nigger, run white nigger, run Spanish nigger."

This is what they were doing – you wouldn't believe it. You'd have to see it. These are people that you call human beings. This is why I said that the Archie Bunkers of Attica are a bunch of hypocrites, man, they're a bunch of sick people. They were beating us with buckles and belts and everything they had.

After we were in our cells they came around with the water hose. I noticed some of the local yokels around here. They had a fire truck up to the back way in the A block area and I could see through the window, they hooked it up to the fire hydrant and brought the hose in and climbed the bars, up the gallery to hose the fellas down whole they were in the cells. They were putting three fellas in a cell.

Everyone got beaten – some fellas got fractures and what not, kicked and abused and racial slurs and things of that nature. After that was done, they came around later after they had wet down the fellas in the cells. They started from the front taking one guy at a time beating him up, putting him back in.

We had to sleep there – we had no furniture – just a spring with no blankets and anything. We were stripped naked – sleeping three to a cell. They opened the windows. It was pretty cold. But we weathered the storm.

That same night, they told me they had orders from Mancusi (the warden) for me to be removed. They took me to D block area and held a gun to my head. They had me in a ditch and they asked me if I was going to beg for my life. Naturally I refused to say anything because I resigned myself to death because I knew these people were sick.

It so happens just at that moment, another correction officer called through the broken window in the hall and he told them to bring me back. So they did, they brought me back and put me in the cell. The very next morning they brought me up to HBZ. I've been here since the 14th – September 14th.

Mancusi says we are up there because we are suspected of being leaders of the rebellion. My understanding of it is that the guys who are up there one time or another, they had some argument with Mancusi or one of these officials concerning their letters or concerning their political books or concerning the food in the messhall. He thinks these guys are trouble-makers – these guys who wrote to senators and thing like that.

They say we're not up there for any kind of punishment and yet we have no desks, we have no stools, cold food and things of that nature. We have no brooms. The cells haven't been swept in over two and a half, three months. No mops, things like that. You can't keep yourself clean. I worked in the metal shop five days a week as a spray painter. It gets pretty sweaty there. If I got caught bringing in a towel into the shop other than shower day, they would lock me up.

PATIENCE HAS
ITS LIMITS.

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George Jackson.

&

IT'S COWARDICE

POETRY

From *Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica* (edited by Celes Tisdale, Broadside Press, Detroit Michigan, 1974)

These poems are the product of a poetry workshop intended as a rehabilitative measure for Attica. A series of 8-week poetry workshops began on May 24, 1972, run by Celes Tisdale who was a member of the Buffalo Black Drama workshop. Mr. Tisdale selected some of the poems from the workshops and published a pamphlet titled "Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica." The pamphlet includes brief biographical information on the poets.

13th and Genocide

The clouds were low
when the sun rose that day.
For the white folks were coming
to lay some black brothers away.
From eight surrounding counties,
the white folks came,
with 12 hundred locks
and some brand new chains.
The word was kill niggers,
kill all you can.
For they don't have the right
to live like men.
Then up in the sky
appeared a big green bird.
And from inside came
these few words.
"Put your hands on your heads
and you won't get hurt,
lie on your bellies,
put your face in the dirt."
Then from a distance
came a black brother's cry.
"I'm a man, white folks,
and like a man I'll die."

By Isaiah Hawkins. Isaiah Hawkins was a prisoner at Attica. He was a member of the prison liaison committee who worked for the betterment of all inmates' conditions. He was released soon after the workshop began.

Attica Reflections

It isn't strange to awake in the silence
Of midnights,
To hear MEN weeping, in harsh and gravelly voices
That turn away your lies,
They have witnessed the slaughter
And heard your songs of merriment
As you filled your cups with blood.
Anoint yourselves in madness,
Dance with Hitler's ghost.

by Hersey Boyer. Born August 19, 1941. Education: 9th grade Junior High School. Birthplace: New York City, Harlem. Time: Life. Desire in life: to be a man wherever I am!

Just Another Page

(September 13-72)

A year later
And it's just another page
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And Attica is a maggot-minded black blood sucker
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And another page of history is written in black blood
And old black mamas pay taxes to buy guns that killed
 their sons
And the consequence of being free...is death
And your sympathy and tears always come too late
And the only thing they do right is wrong
 And it's just another page.

By John Lee Norris (Kamua). Born November 1941. Birthplace: New York City. Sign: Scorpio. A father with one son. Dropped out of high school in the second year. I am a musician who plays drums. I write poetry as love and preparation for becoming a playwright. Favorite poets are Imamu Baraka, Don Lee, Carolyn Rogers, and Langston Hughes.

Sept. 13

Let the drums roll
Give the first command
That puts us in the ground

R-E-A-D-Y!

We stiffen our shoulders
Hold our heads up high
Let the world take note
That proud, black men
Are here about to die

A-A-A-I-M!

If our actions
Cause brothers and sisters to unite
As we die,
In their fighting spirits we live.
So let the drums roll
And damn that final order that puts us in
The ground...
F-I-R-E!

By Christopher Sutherland – Multi-talented (poet, musician) and eyes that appear to pierce the soul – an early standout in the group sessions.

Was it Necessary?

Was it really necessary?
Did they really have to carry
Rifles and shotguns?
Let's ask the gov',
Who's so full of love!

Was it really necessary?
Did they really have to carry
Rifles and shotguns?
Against sticks and knives!
Was it worth 43 lives?
Let's ask the gov',
Who's so full of love!

Was it really necessary?
Did they really have to carry
Rifles and shotguns?
Shoot them with intent to kill!
Shoot them even when they lay still!
 Let's ask the gov',
Who's so full of love?

Was it really necessary?
Did they really have to carry
Rifles and shotguns?
While troopers were killing with hate and glee,
Rock was safe in Albany!
 Wasn't he?
 Let's ask the gov',
 Who's so full of love!

Was it really necessary?
Did they really have to carry
Rifles and shotguns?
Rock on T.V., says he didn't know,
While 43 are helping daisies to grow!!
 Does it sound like I'm angry?
 Damn right, my heart pains me!!
 Let me tell you something,
 Since it's time for me to split.
 Don't ask the governor nothing, Man,
 Cause he's full of it.
 Peace.

By Samuel L. Washington

Born: 1952. Birthplace: Toledo, Ohio. Sign: Libra. I came to Buffalo at age 3 and attended school until age 16. Dropped out; drugs, two minor arrests before this; conviction on manslaughter. My sentence is 16 years.

Formula for Attica Repeats

.....and when
the smoke cleared
they came aluminum paid
lovers
from Rock/The/Terrible,
refuser
of S.O.S. Collect Calls,
Executioner.

They came tearless
tremblers,
apologetic grin factories
that breathed Kool
smoke-rings
and state-prepared speeches.
They came
like so many unfeeling fingers
groping without touching
the 43 dead men
who listened...
threatening to rise
again...

By Mshaka (Willie Monroe) –Diminutive, incisive young man who was released from the prison and transferred after two sessions in the workshop.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Attica: The Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica (1972)

Attica: My Story by Russell G. Oswald (1972)

The Brothers of Attica by Richard X. Clark (1973)

A Time to Die by Tom Wicker (1975)

FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS OF THE ATTICA UPRISING

Ramsey Clark Discusses William Kunstler's Involvement as a Community Observer who had been asked to come to Attica by the prisoners: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_clark.php

Prisoner Carlos Roche on Life at Attica: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_roche.php

Prison Guard Michael Smith (who was held hostage at Attica): http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/disturbing_the_universe_interv.php

OTHER USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

(these are out of print but can be purchased from used book stores)

Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica. Edited by Celes Tisdale. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974.

Voices from Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners. New York: Attica Fund, 1972.

We Are Attica: Interviews with Prisoners from Attica. New York: the Attica Defense Committee, 1972

MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

Attica Revisited is an invaluable resource that includes tons of useful information including film clips, documents from the McKay Commission, radio interviews, etc. about the rebellion: www.talkinghistory.org/attica

The documentary “Disturbing the Universe” about lawyer William Kunstler (who served as an observer and prisoner liaison at Attica) includes a section on the Attica Revolt. It can be found here:
www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/additional_video1.php

The PBS documentary “the Rockefellers” addresses the Attica Prison Uprising as part of its discussion of Nelson Rockefeller. You can find clips of interviews with Frank Smith and with Robert Douglass (who had been sent by the Governor to negotiate at Attica)
www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf_5.html

Bob Dylan wrote a song about George Jackson’s death:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a_sfn4YdsY

John Lennon wrote a song titled Attica State:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=llPuQeDL5i0

Muhammad Ali wrote a poem about the Attica Rebellion which he recites in this wonderful clip on Youtube:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhGX8f7vEqc&feature=player_embedded#at=176

FILMS

Against the Wall (1994) – This is a feature-length film about the Attica uprising featuring Samuel L. Jackson. Make what you will of this. The film can be purchased at Amazon.com for under \$10.

The Ghosts of Attica (2001) – A riveting 90 minute documentary about the uprising – It is expensive so find your local University library and borrow it from there. <http://icarusfilms.com/new2001/gho.html>

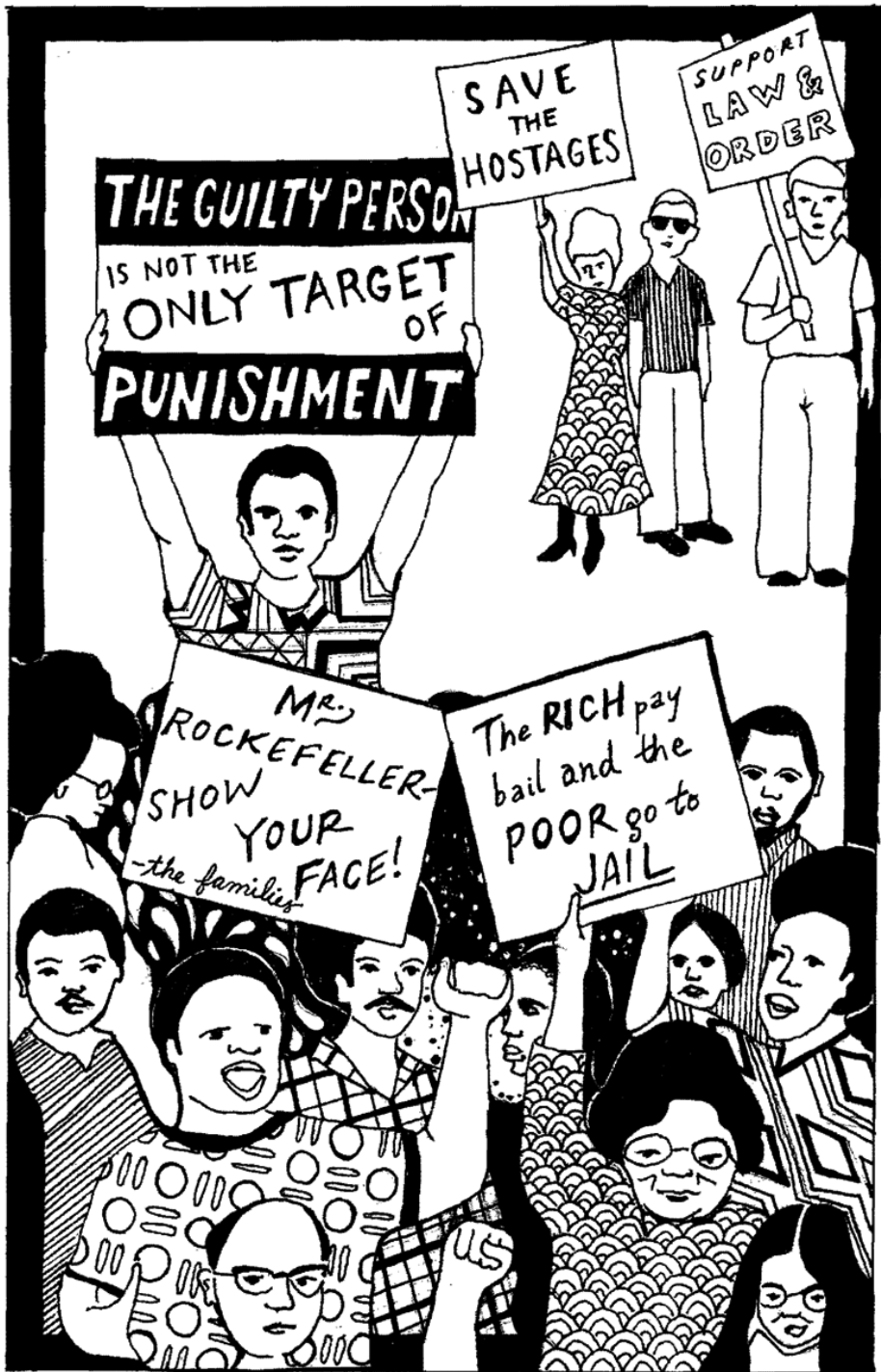
The Killing Yard (2002) – This is a Showtime produced film featuring Alan Alda and Morris Chesnut. I don’t think that this film is available on DVD.

CURRENT PRISONER-LED PROTEST MOVEMENTS

The California Prison Hunger Strike began July 1 at the Pelican Bay State Prison and spread to 13 facilities. To support the prisoners' ongoing efforts, visit www.prisons.org/hungerstrike.htm

Indiana Prison Solidarity is a group supporting prisoner protests in Indiana as a result of a four-prison lockdown in August, 2011. Visit <http://anarchistnews.org/?q=node/15118> for updates or email indianaprisonersolidarity@gmail.com

The Georgia Prison Strike of December 2010 highlighted the terrible conditions inside Georgia's correctional facilities. In Georgia, 1 in 13 residents are under correctional supervision of some kind. Passage of recent draconian anti-immigrant laws threatens to further elevate the numbers of people under state supervision or detention. Read more about the strike and get involved with ongoing efforts here: www.aclu.org/blog/prisoners-rights/georgia-prison-strike-outgrowth-nations-addiction-incarceration or here: <http://georgiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com/>



IN MEMORY OF ALL WHO DIED AT ATTICA

William Allen	Edward R. Menefee
L. D. Barkley	Jose Mentijo
John B. Barnes	Milton Menyweather
Edward Cunningham	John G. Monteleone
John J. D'Arcangelo	Richard Moore
Bernard Davis	Carlos Prescott
Allen Durham	Michael Privitera
Willie Fuller	William E. Quinn
Melvin D. Gray	Raymond Rivera
Elmer G Hardie	James B. Robinson
Robert J. Henigan	Santiago Santos
Kenneth E. Hess	Barry J. Schwartz
Thomas B. Hicks	Harold Thomas
Emanuel Johnson	Carl Valone
Herbert W. Jones Jr.	Rafael Vasquez
Richard J Lewis	Melvin Ware
Charles Lundy	Elon F. Werner
Kenneth B. Malloy	Ronald Werner
Gidell Martin	Willie West
William B. McKinney	Harrison Whalen
Lorenzo McNeil	Alfred Williams
Samuel Melville	