

Ex-convicts say California penitentiaries house racism, religion, rhetoric and revolutionaries

By Jim Stingley and Jack Jones
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LOS ANGELES—"The same kind of crap happening in the prisons has been happening for years," the Black ex-convict said with rising fury. "Then, they called us 'troublemaking niggers.' Now, they call us 'revolutionaries.'"

In the south-central Los Angeles headquarters of an organization of former inmates trying to steer Black youngsters away from drugs, six other men agreed on one basic point: "If you're Black, your ass is in trouble from the day you go in."

But in Oakland, a 37-year-old Black warehouseman who recently finished ten years in San Quentin for murder told it differently:

"The young Blacks in there are spouting rhetoric because they think this is the thing to do, you know. To hear these guys talk, everybody's wrong except the convicts."

"Well, I know better than this. I know that most of the things that happen to a convict is because the convict does it to himself."

Some ex-convicts who were asked for their views of what is happening behind the walls of California's prisons were interviewed singly. Others were in groups.

Some are in their late 20s or early 30s, aged only by grim years in one penitentiary after another. Others are "old cons," who survived by keeping their mouths shut and staying away from flareups of trouble in prison yards and cellblocks.

One is a White man, a San Francisco artist who went to the California training facility at Soledad on a narcotics conviction. Then, because of various violations, he landed in several camps and the California state prisons at Folsom and San Quentin.

They agree on some things and differ widely on others.

Not surprisingly, the younger Black ex-convicts generally express intense resentment over racism they say they've seen on the part of guards and White inmates, or over the fact that many of them have served longer stretches than Whites imprisoned on similar charges.

"To be a man and speak out about injustices means you are a militant," said one young Black, complaining that the parole board adds time for anyone who "doesn't say the things they want to hear."

Of those interviewed, none volunteered any claim to innocence of the crime for which he was committed—except for one man who said he was returned to prison after 16 days of freedom for a strongarm robbery he didn't pull.

The Black warehouseman distinguished between himself and other inmates: "To start with, I wasn't criminally oriented. I just happened to get into a hassle and committed a murder."

Nor did any of them suggest prison should have a country club atmosphere. In essence, most of the complaints centered on the prison system's failure (or reluctance, in their view) to rehabilitate inmates, really train them for outside jobs, or to eliminate racism.

Who is really a revolutionary in prison?

"That's just someone who is opposed to the injustices in the

institution," responded a 30-year-old Black who spent 8½ years in San Quentin, Soldad, Folsom and other institutions.

At Los Angeles' Central City Community Center, a state-financed halfway house where he is on the work-furlough program awaiting his parole date, he said:

"The counter-revolutionary body (prison administration) wants to keep all the antiquated methods going. They don't want any change. You say anything about it, they write in your jacket (personnel file) that you're a militant and move you from institution to institution."

A member of the Inner-City Bricks—ex-convicts banded together for an antidrug program at the Central City Community Mental Health Center—said in a group discussion:

"If you try to learn much, they say you're a militant. They check on everything you read. You tell the psychiatrist that Lincoln didn't really free all the slaves and he'll put that in your jacket. It will cost you another 12 months."

Another: "The bulls (guards) don't worry about the Muslims any more. It used to be if you wore your hair short or shaved, you were classified a Muslim. Now they see that's a religious thing. But if you wear a natural, you're a militant, a Panther."

A 49-year-old veteran of San Quentin and Folsom now on the work-furlough program said:

"Mostly, it's the young prisoners, bringing on a new awakening of all the Blacks. The young guys can see where the older ones have been under the same treatment for years. That's what it's all about."

The Oakland warehouse worker: "The Panthers started coming about '67, '68. They had this big shootout in Oakland that led (Eldridge) Cleaver to skip the state. Some of the guys involved in that shootout came to San Quentin."

"They'd say, 'I'm a Black

panther. Hey Man, we killed four or five pigs. Well, you know, you'll have guys who are not anything. But they'll follow the strongest guy. Suddenly you got a lot of sympathizers—penitentiary Panthers."

"Now, where all the Black Muslims wanted to do was sit in a corner and talk to Allah, the Panthers wanted changes now and by any means necessary."

The White artist: "At first, I wouldn't say they (the Blacks) were Uncle Toms. They were going about their business and they weren't militant. There wasn't all that 'kill whitey' business."

"But just in the past four years—since they started having all this Black Power—it just started snowballing. They have all these people start hollering and screaming about what you have, what you don't have, what you can get."

"So today there's no talking to them, no going down the middle at all. They keep reading all this 'Black is free' and 'Black is beautiful' stuff, you know. Okay, maybe on the outside, that's something else, but when you get into an institution and get bolted down, that makes it bad. They band together. They start believing their own stuff."

"Walking down the tiers with them, they won't get out of the way. You got to get out of their way. Now that's never happened before. There used to be some respect."

What about racism in prison? Some of the bitterest Black ex-convicts say:

"You got White inmates that are Nazis and guards feel the same way. I remember this one guard broke down and cried, man, the day that Lincoln Rockwell (American Nazi leader) got killed."

"The orientation for guards is the same wherever you go—'keep the Nigger in his place.'"

"A Black's life is threatened constantly all the time he's in."

But the Black who at 49 is an "old con," said, "I could single out the officers who had those deep southern feelings and be kind of careful. Many Black inmates automatically feel they're not going to get a fair shake, because all they see is White guards."

And the Black warehouseman in Oakland, asked if he had ever been mistreated by a White guard, replied:

"I never experienced it personally. I've never seen it done. Now, I have seen convicts swing on an officer and the officer protect himself, then hear the convict holler 'brutality.' But as far as an officer just arbitrarily picking out somebody and messing over them, no. I've heard stories, but I was there 10 years and I never saw it."

"There is discrimination in the joint. But it's not on the large scale it's blown up to be. There are jobs Blacks can't get."

The 49-year-old Black "old con," who last April went from Folsom to the relatively pleasant California Institution for Men at Chino, contended, "Relations between White and Black prisoners are getting better."

He said that change is partly because of group counseling sessions instituted in the mid-1960s, sessions he said began to bring out the feelings of Black rage, but which also led many Blacks and Whites "to realize their own racial feelings."

Members of the Inner-City Bricks were not so certain that White and Black inmates have begun to come together.

"Maybe at some institutions," said one. "But that's because there's so many Blacks being sent up now, Whites aren't so ready to fight. It's a balance of power thing."

If one thing stands out in the complaints of Black ex-cons along with the hatred many feel for White guards, it is the indeterminate sentence system under which prisoners, without

specified release dates, can be held for additional months for infractions or inability to convince the parole board of their "rehabilitation."

A slick White can say all the right things and slide past the board, some of them say, while the Black who is afire with pent-up feelings of racial discrimination cannot.

"If a Nigger is clean for five years inside the pen, they just say you are too sneaky to get caught," one angry Black said.

"The average White guy on second-degree murder gets two and a half to five years," said another. "The average Black on the same charges does seven to 12 years."

The 49-year-old Black "old con": "Things have been building inside ever since guys started getting longer sentences. Especially the younger guys can't get adjusted to doing that big time. It's brought out a lot of hostility."

What about the general conditions and training facilities?

"Conditions are worst in the (maximum security) adjustment centers. At Quentin, I had rain comin' right in my cell," said one.

Other comments:

"What training? There's a long waiting list for something like the welding shop and what they teach you is outmoded. They got a textile shop. You know how many textile mills there are in California where you might get a job when you get out? One."

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