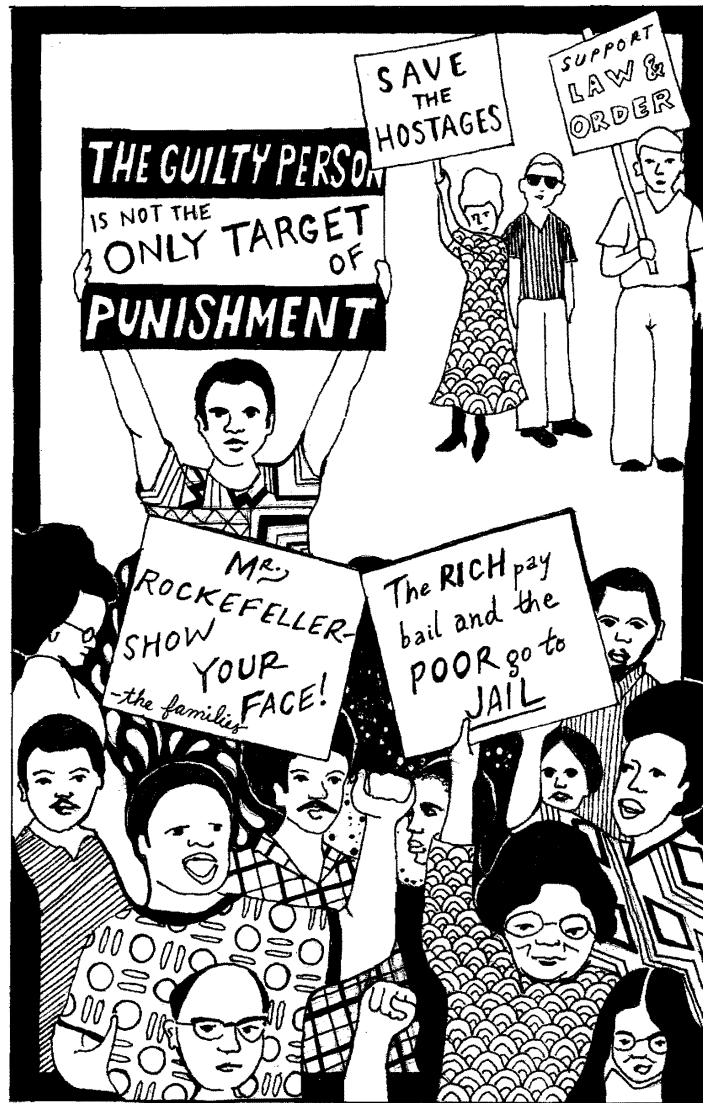


# ATTICA PRISON UPRISING 101: A SHORT PRIMER

By Mariame Kaba, Project NIA



with contributions by Lewis Wallace  
and illustrations by Katy Groves

Design and Layout by Caitlin Seidler

September 2011

## A NOTE FROM MARIAME...

This publication about the Attica Prison uprising of 1971 is not intended to be a curriculum guide, but a brief primer for educators and organizers. It includes a timeline of events (with primary sources); testimonies from Attica prisoners; poetry by Attica prisoners; sample activities for youth; and other suggested resources.

We do not claim to have addressed all of the complexity of the rebellion in this short document. This is by no means intended to be the definitive word about the context and meaning(s) of the rebellion. We simply offer this resource as another in the long line of publications that have been produced about the Attica uprising. We do so knowing that we will omit a lot important information. This is unavoidable.

We had been looking for exactly this type of resource to foster our own popular education efforts and activism on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Attica rebellion. We didn't find anything that quite worked so we took it upon ourselves to create what would be useful for us. A core value of ours is to share information with others in order to facilitate movement-building to eradicate incarceration. As such, we share this resource with you.

This guide was produced by organizers and educators rather than by historians. While we tried to be objective, we are not neutral. We state this unabashedly and honestly. We sincerely hope that this material is useful to you if you plan to discuss the Attica uprising with your students, community members, and others. We encourage others in the future to add to our collective knowledge about the Attica Rebellion and its legacy.

If you have any questions about this resource, please feel free to contact Mariame Kaba at [mariame@project-nia.org](mailto:mariame@project-nia.org).

Finally, we invite you to freely reproduce and distribute this primer. We ask that it be disseminated at no cost and that Project NIA ([www.project-nia.org](http://www.project-nia.org)) be acknowledged as producing this resource. We love hearing from folks about how they have used our resources so make sure to drop us a line!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the following people who contributed to making this primer a reality...

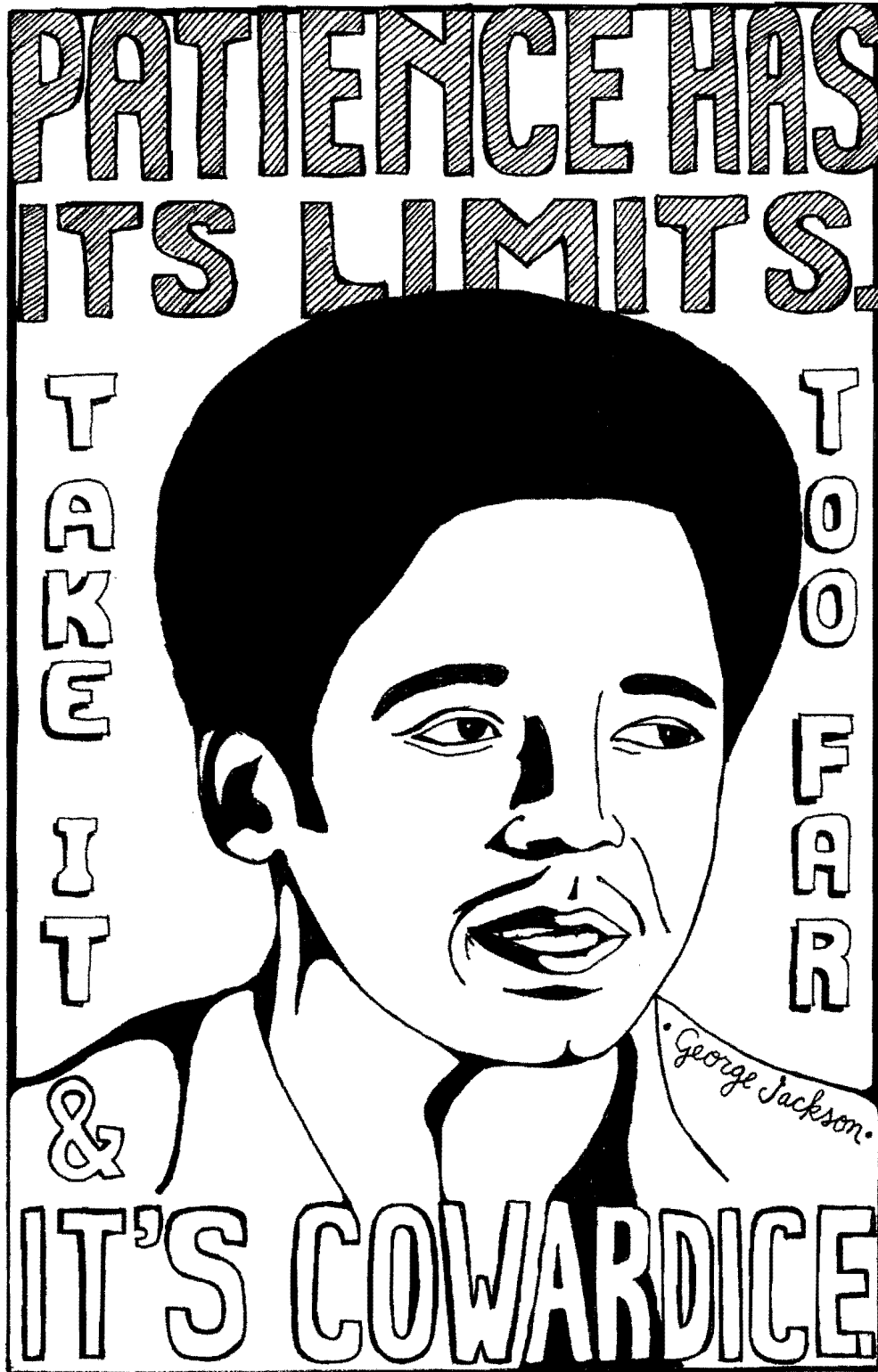
Caitlin Seidler has once again lent her considerable talents to designing and laying out this resource. Caitlin's commitment to social justice is unrivaled and she has our deepest gratitude.

Lewis Wallace has been integral to the development of our work at Project NIA. He is a terrific organizer who is committed to the abolishment of prisons. We would like to thank Lewis for all of his contributions to this project.

Katy Groves is a fierce advocate and ally to youth in conflict with the law. She is tireless in the struggle for criminal legal reform. Our thanks to Katy for her incredible illustrations.

Finally, this primer is dedicated to the memory of all who died at Attica, we will not forget:

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



# **ATTICA PRISON UPRISING 101: A SHORT PRIMER BY MARIAME KABA WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY LEWIS WALLACE**

## **INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF A REBELLION**

On September 8<sup>th</sup> 1971, two prisoners were roughhousing in the yard at Attica Prison. 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 escorted by guards to the infamous “box” in Housing Block Z (HBZ). Prisoners at Attica had heard stories about what happened to people who were 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. Others claim to have witnessed one of the prisoners being struck by guards on his way to the “box.” 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 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From September 9 to 13, 1971, prisoners took control of the Attica Correctional Facility. They made a series of demands to prison administrators and held about 40 people as hostages. After four days of fruitless negotiations, Nelson Rockefeller ordered that the prison be retaken; 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 suggested that: *“With the exception of Indian massacres in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; the State Police assault which ended the four-day prison uprising was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War.”*

The uprising did not come out of nowhere. 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 383 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. They also worked about five hours a day and were paid between twenty

cents and one dollar for their day's labor. Prisoner Frank "Big Black Smith" offered his recollections of life at Attica in 1971:

*"Conditions in 1971 was bad – bad food, bad educational programs, very, very low, low wages. What we called slave wages. Myself, I was working in the laundry and I was making like thirty cent a day; being the warden's laundry boy. And I'm far from a boy.*

*You get one shower a week. You know, a shower to us in Attica state prison is a bucket of water, and if you lucky and you get the right person outside of your cell that would bring you a second bucket, then you can wash half of your body with one bucket. What we would do is wash the top of our body with one bucket, and if we get a second bucket then we will wash the bottom part of our body. And you get one shower a week.*

*The books in the library was outdated. They didn't have any kind of positive recreation for us. If there was any recreation, it was minimum. It would only be on the weekends. And Attica is four prisons in one. You got A yard, B yard, C yard, and D yard and two mess hall. And the only time you would see a person that's in A block if you in B block, like I were, is when you would go to the mess hall and sometime you might run into him. "Dehumanizing," the word would be for the conditions in Attica in 1971<sup>1</sup>.*"

Prisoner Carlos Roche, interviewed for the documentary 'Disturbing the Universe,' provided details about racial segregation at Attica:

*"When I first went to Attica, they gave out ice once a year. Frozen water. They would bring it on the fourth of July and say, "White ice!" Bring it in fifty-five-gallon drums, open the door to the yard, throw it out on the ground and say, "White ice!" and only white guys could get the ice. And they would take the drums back to the mess hall, fill them up again and bring it back and say, "Black ice!" and anybody could take the ice, you know. And that was the first thing that hit me, and I mean it blew my mind. I was ... I couldn't believe it, you know. And that went on from '66 to '70. And then they stopped it in '70.*

*Uh, haircuts was segregated, a white guy couldn't cut a black guy's hair or vice versa. Uh, the mail was insane. If I had a letter from a lawyer and I gave it to you to read, and the letter was found in your cell, we both went to the box. You got a year and I got two years. And every two days you did in seg, you lost a day of good time, you know. That was Attica, you know<sup>2</sup>.*"

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<sup>1</sup> In *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. New York: Bantam Books, 1990. Pp. 545-546.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Attica Prisoner, Carlos Roche, from *Disturbing the Universe*, a documentary about William Kunstler - [http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview\\_roche.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_roche.php)

Attica had been on a slow boil throughout the summer of 1971. In May-June 1971, five Attica Prisoners established the Attica Liberation Faction (ALF). The five founders were Frank Lott (who took on the title of Chairman), Donald Noble, Carl Jones-EL, Herbert X. Blyden, and Peter Butler. Carl Jones-EL suggested that the ALF was founded:

*“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<sup>3</sup>.”*

Lee Bernstein (2010) provides some background about the founders of the *Attica Liberation Faction*:

*“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<sup>4</sup>.”*

The McKay Commission suggested that during that summer prisoners at Attica participated in peer-led classes in sociology. These were 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*

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<sup>3</sup> Voices From Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, Lee (2010). *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.



*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 inmates<sup>5</sup>.”*

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 by Chicano prisoner, Martin Sousa, 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 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 did.”<sup>6</sup>*

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 refer-

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.



ences 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<sup>7</sup>.”

Donald Noble, a member of the Attica Liberation Faction, explains what the prisoners hoped to accomplish through the Manifesto:

*“Well, I’m one of the men whose name was on the manifesto [that] was submitted to Oswald. We submitted a manifesto, 28 demands, to Oswald in July. We also submitted one to Rockefeller. We also submitted one to Shirley Chisholm. We also submitted one to Arthur Eve and different other legislative people and lawyers and so forth. You know, we got a beautiful reply back from Oswald, think it was sometime in August. He acknowledged our letter and so forth, and he was enthused about the way the manifesto was drawn up, because this was more or less coincide with his ideas. And he stated that he is for all these here changes that we talked about, because he sees that they are needed, but to give him time. And, everybody went along with him, because a lot of us have had dealings with Oswald for years, coming back and forth while he’s sitting on the parole board. Like there was things that all he had to do was more or less get in touch with the warden here that would have gone into effect. And these things more or less didn’t take place. [...] He said he was going to look into these things, but they would take time. So he came here. He made a speech, but the speech he made, a lot of people didn’t like it because he talked about long range things. But people wanted to know what he gonna do about the problem what exists here<sup>8</sup>.”*

When George Jackson was killed by correctional officers at San Quentin Prison in August 1971, his killing sparked protests including work stoppages at prisons across the U.S. At Attica, the different prisoner factions, that 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*

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<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, Lee (2010). *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

*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 things<sup>9</sup>.*”

The Attica prison uprising was the most dramatic and deadly of the post-Jackson killing protests. However, the seeds of the revolt had been sown way before Jackson’s death.

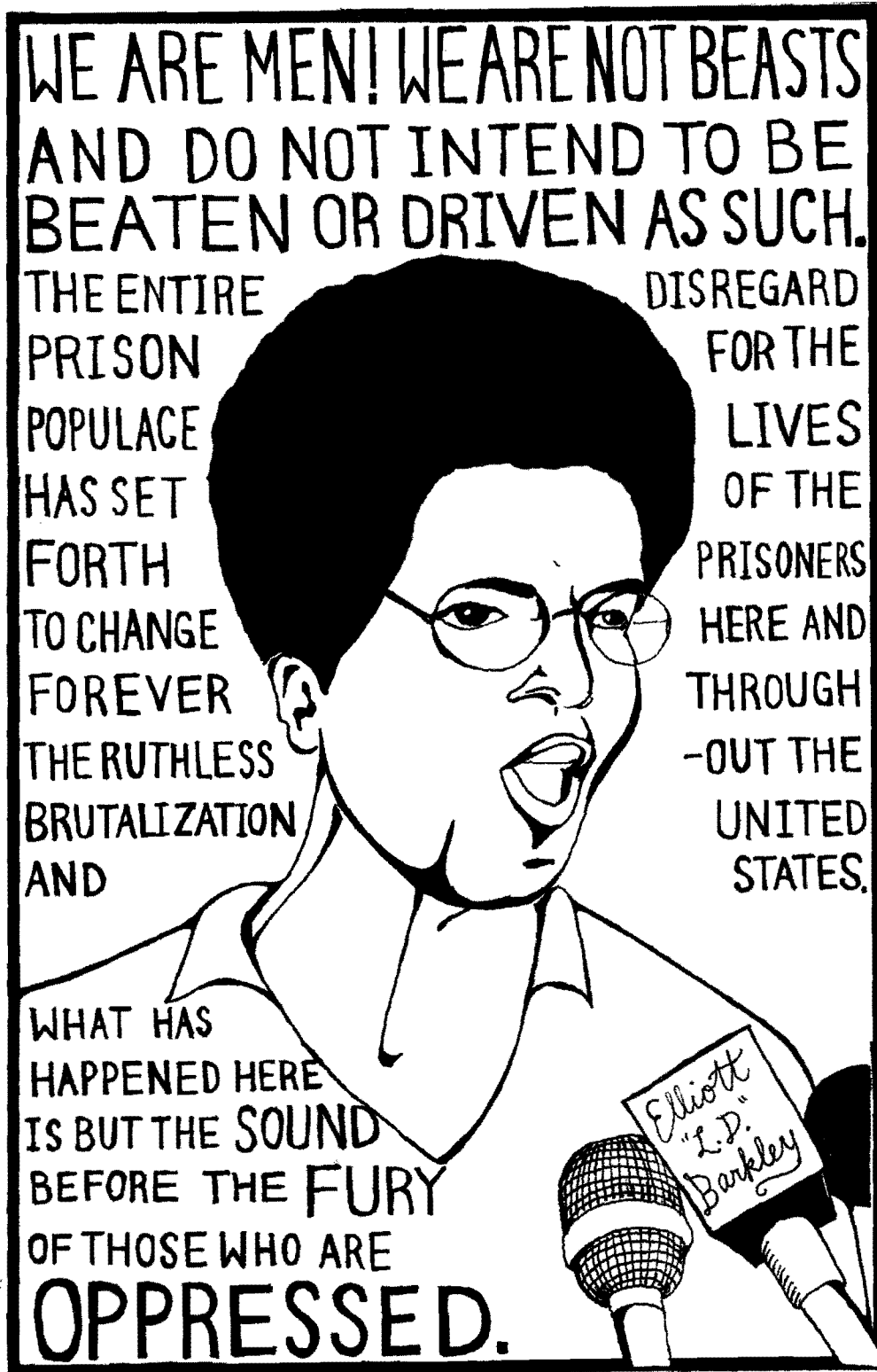
On the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Attica Prison revolt, we felt that it was a good time to both reflect on the conditions that precipitated the rebellion and to examine its legacy. In 1970, there were 48,497 people in federal and state prisons<sup>10</sup> in the U.S. By 2009, there were 1,613,740<sup>11</sup> 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. There is a continued need to investigate the conditions of our prisons today and to advocate for an end to mass incarceration.



<sup>9</sup> Donald Noble, interview, in *Prisons on Fire: George Jackson, Attica, and Black Liberation*, audio CD (San Francisco: Freedom Archives, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> Numbers for both years 1970 and 2009 exclude the jail population.



## **TIMELINE OF EVENTS AT ATTICA PRISON (COMPILED BY MARIAME KABA USING VARIOUS SOURCES)**

The following timeline of events was compiled by Mariame Kaba, director of Project NIA, based on several sources. It is by no means exhaustive and is provided as an introduction to the Attica Prison uprising. We encourage you to conduct further research to augment this timeline. A number of useful resources about the rebellion are provided at the end of this primer.

**AUGUST 1970** The men in Auburn prison revolted. Forty of them are transferred to Attica. At the same time a struggle begins at Attica for higher wages and lower commissary prices. It included petitioning and, later a strike by hundreds of prisoners. This 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 Herbert Blyden was a leader of the uprising.

**JUNE 1971** The Attica Liberation Faction is founded by five prisoners.

**JULY 2, 1971** 27 demands are presented to Commissioner Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller by the Attica Liberation Faction.

# Attica Manifesto (JULY 2, 1971)

The following is the list of demands that were presented to Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller on July 2, 1971 by the Attica Liberation Faction.

We, the men of Attica Prison, have been committed to the New York State Department of Corrections by the people of society for the purpose of correcting what has been deemed as social errors in behavior. Errors which have classified us as socially unacceptable until reprogrammed with new values and more thorough understanding as to our values and responsibilities as members of the outside community. The Attica Prison program in its structure and conditions have been enslaved on the pages of this Manifesto of Demands with the blood, sweat, and tears of the inmates of this prison.

The program which we are submitted to under the façade of rehabilitation are relative to the ancient stupidity of pouring water on a drowning man, inasmuch as we are treated for our hostilities by our program administrators with their hostility as medication.

In our efforts to comprehend on a feeling level an existence contrary to violence, we are confronted by our captors with what is fair and just, we are victimized by the exploitation and the denial of the celebrated due process of law.

In our peaceful efforts to assemble in dissent as provided under this nation's U.S. Constitution, we are in turn murdered, brutalized, and framed on various criminal charges because we seek the rights and privileges of all American People.

In our efforts to intellectually expand in keeping with the outside world, through all categories of news media, we are systematically restricted and punitively remanded to isolation status when we insist on our human rights to the wisdom of awareness.

## **MANIFESTO OF DEMANDS**

1. We Demand the constitutional rights of legal representation at the time of all parole board hearings and the protection from the procedures of the parole authorities whereby they permit no procedural safeguards such as an attorney for cross-examination of witnesses, witnesses in behalf of the parolee, at parole revocation hearings.
2. We Demand a change in medical staff and medical policy and procedure. The Attica Prison hospital is totally inadequate, understaffed, and prejudiced in the treatment of inmates. There are numerous "mistakes" made many times; improper and erroneous medication is given by untrained



personnel. We also demand periodical check-ups on all prisoners and sufficient licensed practitioners 24 hours a day instead of inmates' help that is used now.

3. We Demand adequate visiting conditions and facilities for the inmate and families of Attica prisoners. The visiting facilities at the prison are such as to preclude adequate visiting for inmates and their families.
4. We Demand an end to the segregation of prisoners from the mainline population because of their political beliefs. Some of the men in segregation units are confined there solely for political reasons and their segregation from other inmates is indefinite.
5. We Demand an end to the persecution and punishment of prisoners who practice the Constitutional Right of peaceful dissent. Prisoners at Attica and other New York prisons cannot be compelled to work as these prisons were built for the purpose of housing prisoners and there is no mention as to the prisoners being required to work on prison jobs in order to remain in the mainline population and/or be considered for release. Many prisoners believe their labor power is being exploited in order for the state to increase its economic power and to continue to expand its correctional industries (which are million-dollar complexes), yet do not develop working skills acceptable for employment in the outside society, and which do not pay the prisoner more than an average of forty cents a day. Most prisoners never make more than fifty cents a day. Prisoners who refuse to work for the outrageous scale, or who strike, are punished and segregated without the access to the privileges shared by those who work; this is class legislation, class division, and creates hostilities within the prison.
6. We Demand an end to political persecution, racial persecution, and the denial of prisoner's rights to subscribe to political papers, books, or any other educational and current media chronicles that are forwarded through the U.S. Mail.
7. We Demand that industries be allowed to enter the institutions and employ inmates to work eight hours a day and fit into the category of workers for scale wages. The working conditions in prisons do not develop working incentives parallel to the many jobs in the outside society, and a paroled prisoner faces many contradictions of the job that add to his difficulty in adjusting. Those industries outside who desire to enter prisons should be allowed to enter for the purpose of employment placement.
8. We Demand that inmates be granted the right to join or form labor unions.

9. We Demand that inmates be granted the right to support their own families; at present, thousands of welfare recipients have to divide their checks to support their imprisoned relatives, who without outside support, cannot even buy toilet articles or food. Men working on scale wages could support themselves and families while in prison.
10. We Demand that correctional officers be prosecuted as a matter of law for any act of cruel and unusual punishment where it is not a matter of life and death.
11. We Demand that all institutions using inmate labor be made to conform with the state and federal minimum wage laws.
12. We Demand an end to the escalating practice of physical brutality being perpetrated upon the inmates of New York State prisons.
13. We Demand the appointment of three lawyers from the New York State Bar Association to full-time positions for the provision of legal assistance to inmates seeking post-conviction relief, and to act as a liaison between the administration and inmates for bringing inmates' complaints to the attention of the administration.
14. We Demand the updating of industry working conditions to the standards provided for under New York State law.
15. We Demand the establishment of inmate worker's insurance plan to provide compensation for work-related accidents.
16. We Demand the establishment of unionized vocational training programs comparable to that of the Federal Prison System which provides for union instructions, union pay scales, and union membership upon completion of the vocational training course.
17. We Demand annual accounting of the inmates Recreational Fund and formulation of an inmate committee to give inmates a voice as to how such funds are used.
18. We Demand that the present Parole Board appointed by the Governor be eradicated and replaced by the parole board elected by popular vote of the people. In a world where many crimes are punished by indeterminate sentences and where authority acts within secrecy and within vast discretion and given heavy weight to accusations by prison employees against inmates, inmates feel trapped unless they are willing to abandon their desire to be independent men.

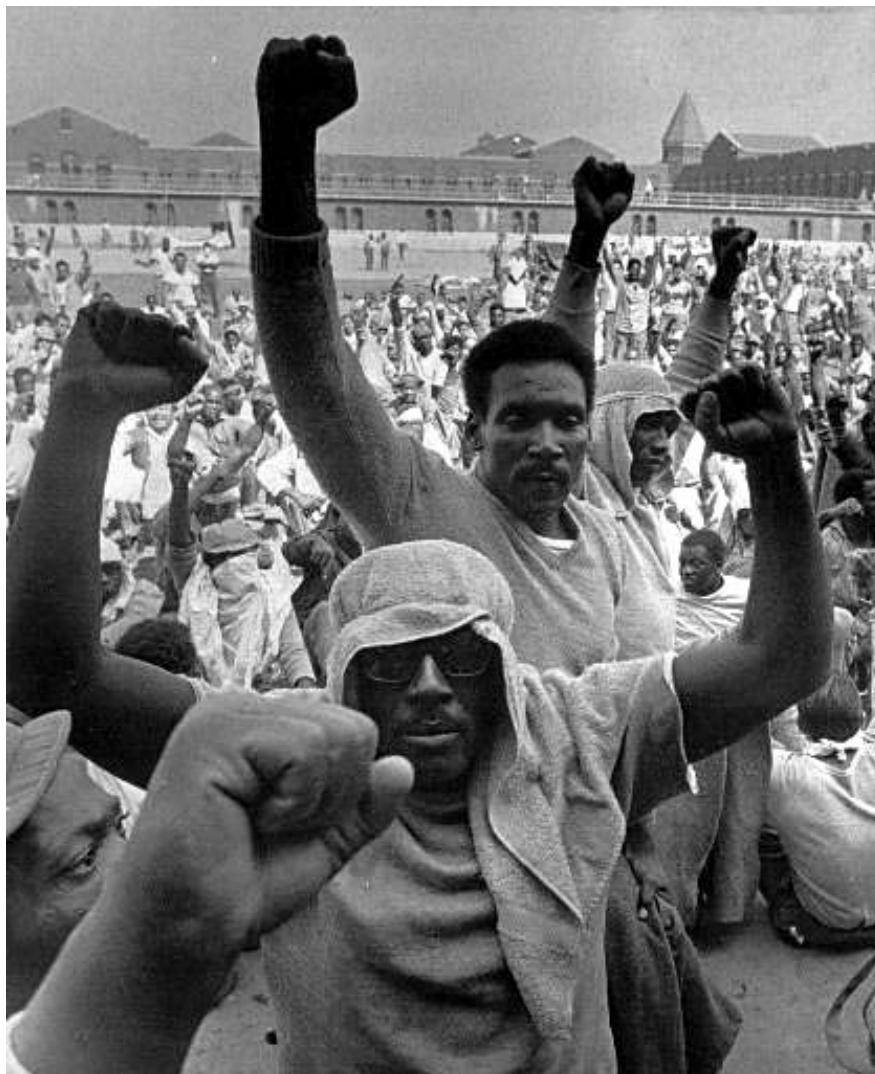



19. We Demand that the state legislature create a full-time salaried board of overseers for the State Prisons. The board would be responsible for evaluating allegations made by inmates, their families, friends and lawyers against employers charged with acting inhumanely, illegally or unreasonably. The board should include people nominated by a psychological or psychiatric association, by the State Bar Association or by the Civil Liberties Union and by groups of concerned involved laymen.
20. We Demand an immediate end to the agitation of race relations by the prison administration of this State.
21. We Demand that the Dept. of Corrections furnish all prisoners with the services of ethnic counselors for the needed special services of the Brown and Black population of this prison.
22. We Demand an end to the discrimination in the judgment and quota of parole for Black and Brown people.
23. We Demand that all prisoners be present at the time their cells and property are being searched by the correctional officers of state prisons.
24. We Demand an end to the discrimination against prisoners when they appear before the Parole Board. Most prisoners are denied parole solely because of their prior records. Life sentences should not confine a man longer than 10 years as 7 years is the considered statute for a lifetime out of circulation, and if a man cannot be rehabilitated after a maximum of ten years of constructive programs, etc., then he belongs in a mental hygiene center, not a prison.
25. We Demand that better food be served to the inmates. The food is a gastronomical disaster. We also demand that drinking water be put on each table and that each inmate be allowed to take as much food as he wants and as much bread as he wants, instead of the severely limited portions and limited (4) slices of bread. Inmates wishing a pork-free diet should have one, since 85% of our diet is pork meat or pork-saturated food.
26. We Demand an end to the unsanitary conditions that exist in the mess hall: i.e., dirty trays, dirty utensils, stained drinking cups and an end to the practice of putting food on the tables hours before eating time without any protective covering over it.
27. We Demand that there be one set of rules governing all prisons in this state instead of the present system where each warden makes rules for his institution as he sees fit.

**IN CONCLUSION**


We are firm in our resolve and we demand, as human beings, the dignity and justice that is due to us by our right of birth. We do not know how the present system of brutality and dehumanization and injustice has been allowed to be perpetrated in this day of enlightenment, but we are the living proof of its existence and we cannot allow it to continue.

The taxpayers who just happen to be our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons should be made aware of how their tax dollars are being spent to deny their sons, brothers, fathers and uncles of justice, equality and dignity.






**AUGUST 21, 1971** George Jackson is killed by correctional officers at San Quentin Prison. They contend that they shot him as he was attempting to escape. No one believes this.




**AUGUST 22, 1971** A hunger strike is called in honor of George Jackson at Attica. Prisoners marched into the mess hall for breakfast single file, sat silently, and refused to eat. Frank Smith who ended up serving on the negotiating committee during the September rebellion describes the scene on 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." The Commission put the number of prisoners participating in that silent protest at seven hundred, 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 sub-standard health facilities. This was the second peaceful protest in as many weeks at Attica.



**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 was played three times over the prison public address system. Oswald said: "I assure you that changes will be made." He asked for more time to implement the requested changes.



**SEPTEMBER 8, 1971** There was an altercation between correctional officers and two prisoners. Later that day, correctional officers led two prisoners whom they believed 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 believed that HBZ was a site of routine, brutal beatings by correctional officers.



**SEPTEMBER 9, 1971** The revolt begins. Prisoners subdue Lieutenant Robert Curtiss in a tunnel that divided the prison yard into quarters. A group of fifteen to twenty-five prisoners eventually overpowered four guards and locked them in cells. The uprising quickly spread 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.

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) – 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 Inmates of Attica Prison



# THE 15 PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

## (handed to 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.

**SEPTEMBER 10, 1971** Uprising continues. 33 observers assemble at Attica and pay a brief visit to D yard.



## A Scene from Inside Attica Prison (SEPTEMBER 10, 1971)

From **A Time to Die** by Tom Wicker (1975) P.96-98

But Wicker's impatience vanished as Brother Flip took the microphone and began to speak, even though Flip's was the same message that had been spoken so often already - men in prison were still men entitled to be treated by other men like men, not as animals or numbers. But the conditions of prison life, of Attica, made it impossible for them to be treated as human beings. That was what the uprising was about, Flip said, that was what the world should understand.

The same message, but different. Wicker could feel, as could the other observers, its gathering power as Flip talked on almost conversationally. He was different from any of the speakers who had preceded him - soft-spoken where most of them had been ranting, persuasive as against their brute force, eloquent in a more learned and sophisticated way. Brother Flip seemed an educated man with a high sense of drama. Wicker speculated that he might have been an actor on the outside; where else could he have found the style to wrap himself in a blanket as if it were the toga of a Roman senator? He had a thin, sensitive face adorned with an elegantly trimmed mustache. His head was quite bald in the glaring lights. When he gestured, his long, expressive fingers underlined his relatively quiet words.

Flip moved toward a peroration as expertly as any politician Wicker had heard on the stump - better than most. D-yard was silent, listening; the bonfires flickered on the walkways. Beyond the linked men of the security chain, the mass of the brothers surrounding the dark circle of hostages were still upon the ground or in their makeshift tents.

"We no longer wish to be treated as statistics, as numbers," Flip cried, his voice rising in volume and intensity, but so controlled as to reinforce Wicker's belief that he was a professional actor. "We want to be treated as human beings." Then, sharp as the crack of a rifle: "We will be treated as human beings!"

The brothers were "not advocating violence," Flip said. "We are advocating communications and understanding." He mentioned Soledad, Kent State, Jackson State. Attica was not different; the brothers of Attica were calling only for what "oppressed people are advocating all over the world...We do not want to rule, we only want to live." Then, the long arms, the sensitive fingers, swept wide to include the observers raptly listening at the table. "But if any of you gentleman own dogs..." the voice fell to a dramatic whisper, "you treating them better than we are treated here."

Scattered applause and yells broke the silence but quickly died, as if most of the brothers realized that Flip was about to reach for the highest, most demanding note. “So we have come to the conclusion...after close study...after much suffering...after much consideration...” In silence so deep that his voice rang back from the surrounding walls, Flip was marching to the inevitable point, taking his listeners with him so that they knew before the words came what they would have to say: “That if we cannot live as people, then we will at least try to die like men!”

The brothers erupted, long-held breaths burst forth in a shattering roar, a thunder of voices carrying out at once – as much in joy, Wicker suspected, as in actual defiance, because he did not believe men cheered the thought of their own deaths, in whatever cause. He could well remember Lurleen Wallace explaining to him what she believed was the source of George Wallace’s popularity in the South, and elsewhere. “He speaks out for the people. He’s not afraid to say what they think. When he’s on ‘Meet the Press’ they can listen to George and think, ‘That’s what I would say if I were up there.’”

So it was with these men, who would not cheer more than any others for the idea of dying, but who would cheer getting it said, as Flip had said it, for all of them, for at least that one time – getting it said to the world that in the ultimate and unavoidable act of humanity, in the limitless brotherhood of dying, if in no other way, they would be men no less and no more than any others.

Flip stood motionless, as they cheered and fell silent. He was standing on one side of the table, the microphone in his hand, the toga flowing from his shoulders, when suddenly he leaned forward and across the table, the light gleaming from his bald, dark head.

“Brother Kunstler!” he cried, the microphone and his head thrust near that of the lawyer seated across from him. “What did they do with you in court?”

Kunstler was still for a moment, in the renewed, breath-drawn silence of the yard. Perhaps he was recalling the Chicago Seven, Judge Hoffman’s courtroom, Bobby Seale in chains, the contempt sentence hanging over his own head. Then, like a woman surrendering to a lover, he rose, his glasses pushed up on his forehead into his long hair, and threw his arms around Flip. There was pain and rapture in Kunstler’s face, in his voice, as he cried out, “The same thing they did with you, Brother!”

The two men embraced, and once again there were cheers. Then, releasing himself, Flip said quietly to the observers, “I want to thank all of you beautiful people for coming here. Stand with us now...walk with us...die with us, if necessary...”

**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 points package with Oswald. This plan was intended to convey what the state would offer in concessions to the prisoners. However the key issue of criminal amnesty was not agreed to. The prisoners reject the 28 points package because they did not trust the state to meet even these promises. Bobby Seale arrives at Attica. There were hopes that he could 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. Tom Wicker (NY Times reporter) describes an incident that took place in the observers' room:

"While Wicker was waiting to sign the list of those going in, he idly picked up a small, crumpled piece of paper from the floor and smoothed it in his hands. "Brother Bobby," the note read, in wobbly script. "Our lives are in your hands. Come! Attica prisoners." Wicker stared at the note. One of the inmates must have smuggled it out of D-yard to Seale, probably via one of the observers sent as messengers to No Man's Land (p.165)."



## The Twenty-eight Points (SEPTEMBER 11, 1971)

The following are the proposals that State Correction Commissioner Russell G. Oswald said that he would accept after a meeting with the observers' committee on September 11<sup>th</sup> 1971.

1. Provide adequate food, water and shelter for all inmates.
2. Inmates shall be permitted to return to their cells or to other suitable accommodations or shelter under their power. The observer committee shall monitor the implementation of this operation.
3. Grant complete administrative amnesty to all persons associated with this matter. By administrative amnesty the state agrees:
  - a. Not to take any adverse parole actions, administrative proceedings, physical punishment or other type of harassment, such as holding inmates incommunicado, segregating inmates, or keep them in isolation or in 24-hour lockup.
  - b. The state will grant legal amnesty in regard to all civil actions that could arise from this matter.
  - c. It is agreed that the State of New York and all its departments, divisions and subdivisions, including the State Department of Corrections and the Attica Correctional Facility and its employees and agents, shall not file or initiate any criminal complaint or act as complainant in any criminal action of any kind or nature relating to property damage or property-related crimes arising out of the incidents at the Attica Correctional Facility during September 9, 10, and 11, 1971.
4. Recommend the application of the New York State Minimum Wage Law standards to all work done by inmates. Every effort will be made to make the records of payments available to inmates.
5. Establish by Oct. 1 a permanent ombudsman service for the facility, staffed by appropriate persons from the neighboring communities.
6. Allow all New York State prisoners to be politically active without intimidation or reprisal.
7. Allow true religious freedom.



8. End all censorship of newspaper, magazines and other publications from publishers, unless it is determined by qualified authority, which includes the ombudsman, that the literature in question presents a clear and present danger to the safety and security of the institutions. Institution spot-censoring only of letters.
9. Allow all inmates at their own expense to communicate with anyone they please.
10. Institute realistic, effective rehabilitation programs for all inmates according to their offense and personal needs.
11. Modernize the inmate education system, including the establishment of a [Spanish-language] library.
12. Provide an effective narcotics treatment program for all prisoners requesting such treatment.
13. Provide or allow adequate legal assistance to all inmates requesting it, or permit them to use inmate legal assistance of their choice in any proceeding whatsoever. In all such proceedings inmates shall be entitled to appropriate due process of law.
14. Reduce cell time, increase recreation time and provide better recreation facilities and equipment, hopefully by Nov. 1, 1971.
15. Provide a healthy diet, reduce the number of pork dishes, increase fresh fruit daily.
16. Provide adequate medical treatment for every inmate. Engage either a Spanish-speaking doctor or interpreters who will accompany Spanish-speaking inmates to medical interviews.
17. Institute a program for the recruitment and employment of a significant number of black and Spanish-speaking officers.
18. Establish an inmate grievance commission, comprised of one elected inmate from each company, which is authorized to speak to the administration concerning grievances and develop other procedures for inmate participation in the operation and decision-making processes of the institution.
19. Investigate the alleged expropriation of inmate funds and the use of profits from the metal or other shops.



20. The State Commissioners of Correctional Services will recommend that the penal law be changed to cease administrative resentencing of inmates returned for parole violation.
21. Recommend that Menenchino hearings be held promptly and fairly. [This concerns the right of prisoners to be represented legally on parole-violation changes.]
22. Recommend necessary legislation and more adequate funds to expand work relief programs.
23. End approved lists for correspondents and visitors.
24. Remove visitation screens as soon as possible.
25. Institute a 30-day maximum for segregation arising out of any one offense. Every effort should be geared toward restoring the individual to regular housing as soon as possible, consistent with safety regulations.
26. Paroled inmates shall not be charged with parole violations for moving traffic violations or driving without a license unconnected with any other crimes.
27. Permit access to outside dentists and doctors at the inmates' own expense within the institution where possible and consistent with scheduling problems, medical diagnosis and health needs.
28. It is expressly understood that members of the observer committee will be permitted into the institution on a reasonable basis to determine whether all of the above provisions are being effectively carried out. If questions of adequacy are raised, the matter will be brought to the attention of the Commissioner of Correctional Services for clearance.

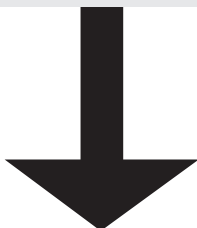
**SEPTEMBER 12, 1971** Uprising continues. Rockefeller, again, refuses pleas of the hostages, Commissioner Oswald and the Observers Committee, as well as the prisoners, to come to Attica.


**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 hostages. The prisoners have no guns. Many of the alleged leaders of the rebellion are selectively marked and assassinated by the State's forces. 39 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

*(continued on next page)*





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 Attica Massacre begin in New York and around the 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. Ultimately 62 prisoners are indicted for their role in the rebellion. The McKay Commission, created by Rockefeller, holds hearings about Attica revolt. The Commission issues a comprehensive report titled "Attica: the Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica."



## THE AFTERMATH: Testimonies from Prisoners<sup>12</sup>

### FRANK SMITH

Frank Smith or “Big Black” was sentenced to 10-15 years for assault, robbery and larceny. Though he has served seven years and should be up for parole soon, it’s not expected that he’ll even have a chance to sit down with the parole board. 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 one 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.

<sup>12</sup> From *Voices From Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners* (1972)

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 pick me up and take me to 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 this, I have an infected eye and I've been complaining about my eye and my jaw for the longest time.

### **FRANK LOTT**

Frank Lott has 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. It seems 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. He has appealed six times and has been turned down but "if you stop swimming you'll drown," he says. One of the judges who heard his appeal is Mitchell Schweitzer, who recently quit the bench after being suspended for taking bribes. Schweitzer, through Frank's attorneys, asked for a \$15,000 payoff - from Frank 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 had gotten 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 down the end and brought the hose in and climbed the bars, up the gallery to hose the fellas down while 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 14<sup>th</sup> – September 14<sup>th</sup>.

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.

# Prison rebellions erupt nationwide

## **From Prisoners Solidarity Committee**

**(Second 8-page newsletter on Attica) - September 30, 1971**

In the wake of the Attica massacre, prison rebellions spread like wildfire across the United States, as the country's 200,000 prisoners expressed their solidarity with the Attica rebellion. The 13 reported rebellions since the Attica massacre doubles the total number of reported prison rebellions since the beginning of this year.

- At Walpole State Prison in Massachusetts, about 200 inmates also staged a day-long strike against the prison factories on September 27.
- At Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, prisoners went on strike against the prison's factories.
- The prison at Atlanta, Georgia, was also the scene of a protest strike against the Attica massacre and similar conditions prevailing there.
- In Terre Haute, Indiana, prisoners launched another protest strike.
- At Wayne County Jail in Detroit, over one hundred police armed with shotguns and tear gas surrounded the prison on September 13 in anticipation of a rumored rebellion planned to protest Attica. Inside, a "shake-down" was carried on.
- At the Women's Prison in Alderson, West Virginia, 37 women, "the more vocal, revolutionary types," as one prison official put it, rebelled against being transferred to maximum security prisons, until finally subdued by pepper gas.

Throughout New York State, billionaire Gov. Rockefeller ordered all prisoners kept under tight security restrictions. Nevertheless, prison rebellions continued:

- At Clinton Prison in Dannemora, N.Y., 250 prisoners, some wearing black armbands, tried to march on the mess hall on September 15 after hearing about Attica, before being turned back by shotgun-carrying prison guards and state troopers.
- At the Great Meadow Prison in Comstock, New York, about 75 inmates rebelled for three hours on September 15, throwing bottles and setting fires.
- At Elmira Prison, New York, about 200 prisoners staged a protest of several hours on September 14, chanting slogans in their cells expressing solidarity with Attica inmates.



## POETRY BY ATTICA PRISONERS

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

*The poems below are the product of a poetry workshop that was 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.*

### 13<sup>TH</sup> 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: 9<sup>th</sup> 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.*



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



**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.*

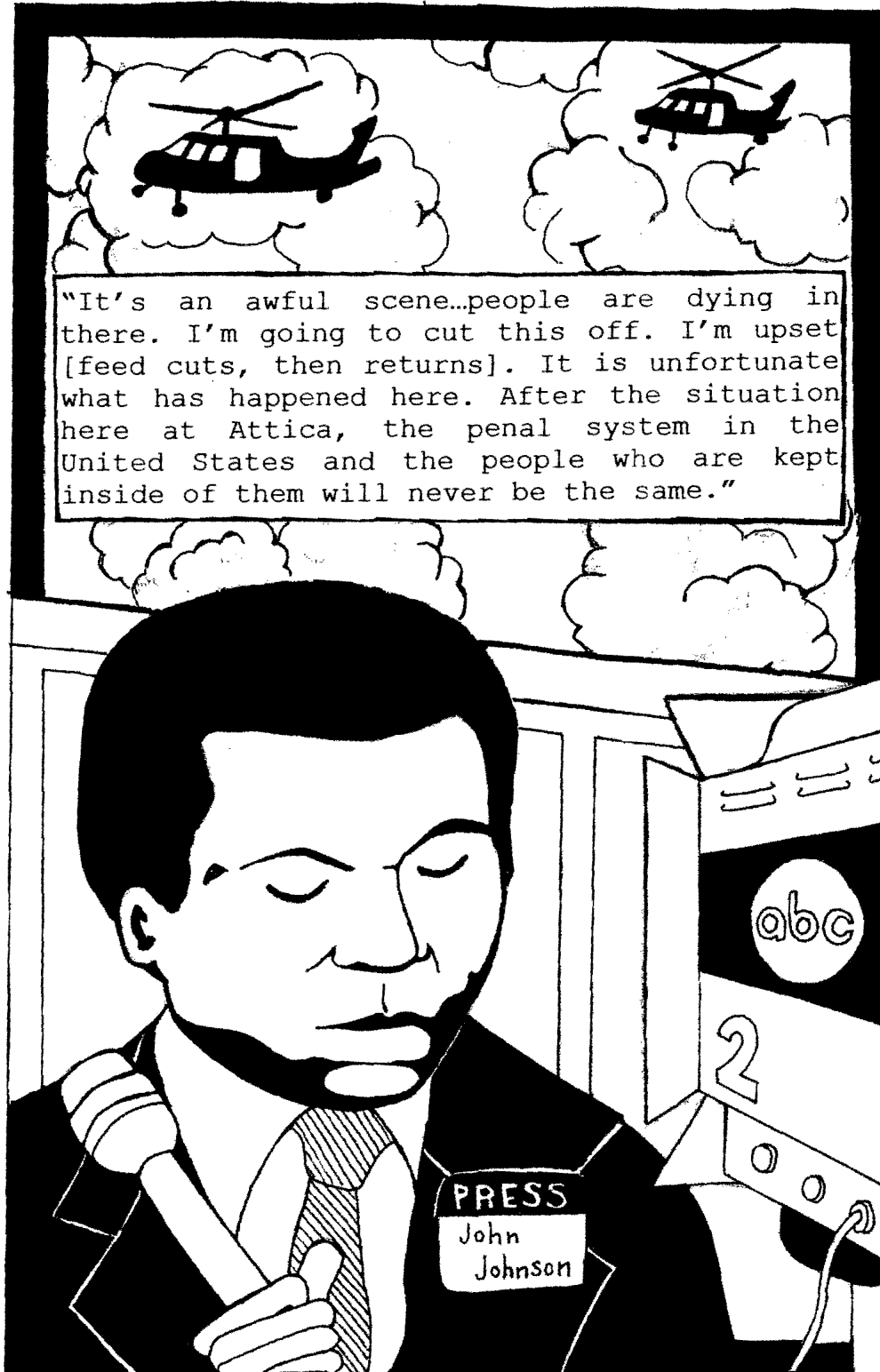
## SAMPLE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH

1. The documentary “Disturbing the Universe” about lawyer William Kunstler (who served as an observer and prisoner liaison at Attica) includes a 10-minute section on the Attica Revolt. It can be found here: [http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/additional\\_video1.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/additional_video1.php). The clip can also be found on YOUTUBE here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXgP0lkqPNk>. Watch and discuss.
2. Use the Timeline of Events provided in the primer to explain the origins of the uprising and what happened. You may want to write out individual points on the timeline onto pieces of paper, and split up into small groups to discuss the points. Then have the groups place them on a broader timeline on the wall and go over it as a group to see how it all fits together.
3. Have students read the Attica poetry out loud, and then discuss. Starting questions: *What was the person who wrote the poem feeling at the time? What do you imagine his role was in the uprising, if any? Does the poem give you a better understanding of the uprising?*
4. Have students write their own “Attica” poem for the 21st century. You can provide them with some inspiration by showing them Muhammad Ali’s Attica poem: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhGX8f7vEqc&feature=player\\_embedded#at=176](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhGX8f7vEqc&feature=player_embedded#at=176)
5. In 1919, Washington, DC newspapers ran wild with sensational stories of an alleged sexual assault that was said to be committed by an African American. The stories sparked a series of twenty riots during the summer of 1919, beginning with a white lynch mob that targeted blacks in Washington. There were 28 public lynchings in the first half of the year, and the following summer and fall came to be known as “The Red Summer of 1919.” The Red Summer was the motivation behind Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die.” (source: <http://www.shmoop.com/if-we-must-die/>). In this poem, the Jamaican-born McKay is urging his brethren to fight back against the racist violence that they are experiencing. Read the poem (**Index A**) and then use the discussion questions to respond.
6. Have students read the excerpt by one of the leaders of the rebellion, Richard X. Clark (**Index B**). Students can answer the discussion questions provided.

## **THE CONTEMPORARY PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX – ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH**

For educators and organizers who are interested in units that can help your students better understand the current prison system, download a copy of our “Something is Wrong: Exploring the Roots of Youth Violence” curriculum guide for two workshop templates: [http://www.project-nia.org/event\\_curriculum-guide.html](http://www.project-nia.org/event_curriculum-guide.html)

We also created a PIC Jeopardy Game which can be downloaded here: <http://rootsofviolence.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/pic-jeopardy.pdf>





## INDEX A

### IF WE MUST DIE (1919)

*By Claude McKay*

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

### QUESTIONS:

- a. How does this poem apply to the Attica Prison Rebellion?
- b. For what reason does McKay say that even a doomed resistance is worthwhile?
- c. What does it mean to die nobly?
- d. Do you believe that the prisoners at Attica died nobly?
- e. Compare the poem "September 13<sup>th</sup>" by Attica Prisoner Christopher Sullivan (you can substitute the poem 13<sup>th</sup> & Genocide by Isaiah Hawkins if you prefer) with Claude McKay's poem. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

## INDEX B

### **EXCERPT FROM “VOICES FROM INSIDE: 7 INTERVIEWS WITH ATTICA PRISONERS” (EDITED FOR LENGTH)**

Richard X. Clark is a 25-year old Black Muslim convicted of attempted robbery. He was one of a number of inmates who had an X marked on their backs by guards after the prison was retaken in September. Elliott “L.D.” Barkley, who also was X-ed, didn’t live past September 13. In February he was to come up for parole but the prison authorities tried to take away 30 days of his “good time.” It was only after a court suit that he was released in the middle of February.

*What’s it been like since the rebellion?*

The brothers here have gone through a lot of hell, we’re still going through a lot of hell but you know this is one of the sacrifices that have to be made to get the message that we want outside. Coming down in the elevator, we are compelled to stand with our backs facing the people who are on the elevator— noses and toes to the wall— while the officers continually harass you, they pat you, slam the doors with their sticks and so forth.

We’ve been tapering off in the respect that we’ve been acting more civilized than they have but it’s getting to the point that we’re going to let loose and tell them to bring the rest of the barrage on. We’re tired of it, that’s all it is. We’re tired of it. We have continually and firmly been voicing that we want to be treated like men. And we want everyone to know it, that we are men.

Now it is understandable that we can’t retaliate in the same amount of force that they use but by using our intelligence which is our unity, our solidarity. We know that for them to do something to one of us they have to do it to all of us. There is no alienation in here. Like there should be none in the communities, in the streets.

White inmates couldn’t even communicate with a black inmate without being subjected to undue harassment, called “faggot,” “punk-lover,” “nigger-lover” or what have you. But due to the extent that we were firm in our convictions, we were able to come together. We understand that we all wear white uniforms upstairs. This is what they’re afraid of, they’re afraid that any time we oppressed people come together, they’ve got to lose. When I say they got to lose, they’ve got to expose themselves.

They exposed themselves by vamping down on us and killing 43 of us, even their own men. The corrections officers who are primarily the lower echelon, they don't understand what's happening. This is a job to them, just like the correction officer who is in here now, he doesn't understand what he's being exposed to. All he understands is that I'm an inmate and he's an officer. He goes home every night and I stay in here.

But in actuality he's in jail because if he analyzed it, he does more time than I do. And not only is he locked up physically but his mind is locked up too. He can't deal with the myths that have been placed in front of him. He can't break them down.

The correction officers who are here now, I don't even think they stopped to think about what had actually transpired in the yard. They don't even stop to think that they could have been placed in the same position that their fellow correction officers were placed in: that Rockefeller and his guards could have come in and killed them too.

When you start using the example of George Jackson, Kent State, even My Lai, they feel that this doesn't relate to them because they are the poor, lower class white people who are in the rural district of Attica. But there's going to be a time that it is going to relate to them. After all, times like when Attica came off the correction officers didn't think that they were vulnerable, that they were dispensible. But they were killed, not by us, but by their own men.

Now the cry has been primarily to free the political prisoners. We know we're not political prisoners, we're slaves. The political prisoner is subjected to reprisals by the system because of his views but a slave is subjected to reprisals because of his situation. If you look at the jails, they're 85% black. Now ask yourself why is it 85% black and not the other way around? It's because blacks are subjected to atrocities from birth — education-wise, job-wise and economically. We are just cast aside on economic grounds by the system. Now when a brother comes to jail he has time to sit down and analyze and really see.

[...]

When we were trying to negotiate, the people saw that the things that we were asking for weren't so extreme that they couldn't have been given to us. They were things that many people thought we had already. This is why we had to stipulate that we wanted to have a concerned Community Committee to make sure that anything that was agreed upon was imposed.

We know that utilizing the tricks and deceitfulness that the system has always been utilizing, that if we were to agree “OK, we’ll go back in our cells if you agree not to beat us, not to stomp us, not to take any reprisals,” once all of the concerned citizens leave the prison, the doors are locked again. Now they’re locked tighter, then the regime can once again come out in full force and do what they want to do.

[...]

We knew that a lot of us were going to be killed but we felt that due to the fact that we had some outside observers that by them exposing, which is what is being done today, exposing the murderers, that this once again would expose the system. Anytime you try to expose the system which is as vast as this system is, you know there are going to be many, many sacrifices. Sacrifices have been made all through time. If all of us have to die to save generations to come then that is what has to be done. No crime was perpetrated by us. Even the hostages could bear witness to this.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- a. What is Richard X. Clark’s overall opinion of the Attica Rebellion?
- b. Why does he believe the rebellion occurred?
- c. What was the relationship like between the prisoners and the guards?
- d. Did anything about his description of the prison surprise you?
- e. Clark says “no crime was perpetrated by us.” What does he mean? Do you agree with him?
- f. *At one point, Clark makes a strong statement: “We know we’re not political prisoners, we’re slaves. The political prisoner is subjected to reprisals by the system because of his views but a slave is subjected to reprisals because of his situation.” Based on what he says about the situation at Attica, what does he mean? Do you agree with his assessment that the prisoners at Attica were not political prisoners, but slaves?*

## RESOURCES

### **BOOKS (OUT OF PRINT BUT CAN BE PURCHASED AT USED BOOKSTORES OR ONLINE)**

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](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](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](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: <http://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:

[http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/additional\\_video1.php](http://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) - [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf\\_5.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf_5.html)

Bob Dylan wrote a song about George Jackson’s death [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a\\_sfn4YdsY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a_sfn4YdsY)

John Lennon wrote a song titled Attica State <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLPuQeDL5i0>

Muhammad Ali wrote a poem about the Attica Rebellion which he recites in this wonderful clip on YOUTUBE: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhGX8f7vEqc&feature=player\\_embedded#at=176](http://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://icarus-films.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.