

A Month in the Ohio Pen

By TOM JOHNSON.

"THE toughest joint in the country to pull time in." That is what the old timers with the scars of half dozen pens seared deep in their grey faces, tell you when you first pull into the Ohio State Penitentiary at Columbus. And take it from one who knows, they are not far wrong.

Charlie Guynn and I were brought down from Belmont County on December 18th to do 5 to 10 years in the Ohio Penn, for the crime of being Communists and attempting to hold a demonstration against war in Martins Ferry last August. Warden Thomas, a typical product of capitalism's penal system himself, met us at the big gate.

"Boys," he said, "I want to give you a tip before you go in. You have political ideas different than mine and different than most of us have. If you are wise you'll keep them to yourselves. If you start any agitation in here you'll damn soon find out that we can get pretty tough. Also there are over 600 ex-service men in here, and if you talk against the government in here one of them may take a notion to punch you in the nose. That's all." Such was our introduction to the Ohio Penitentiary.

We were immediately separated, and that night as I marched to my cell I found that 3 ex-soldiers had been assigned me as cell mates.

As soon as we were locked in our little 12 by 14 cell, one of my cell mates told me that he and the other two boys had been called down to the Deputy Warden's office the day before and told that they were to cell with a wild Bolshevik, and that they were to do their best to show me the error of my ways and to "Americanize" me. Quite evidently the "punch on the nose" was to come early if the Warden could maneuver it.

Unfortunately for the Warden's plans for my "Americanization," my ex-soldier cell mates, two of them wounded in France, and then kicked out of the army with less than \$100 each and no job in sight, had been thoroughly disillusioned with American "prosperity." In no time at all, these boys, at the same time products and victims of capitalist exploitation, were asking me if the Communist Party would accept them as members on their release from prison.

"A punch on the nose," the Warden had said. I doubt if any prisoner ever had the unquestioned sympathy and admiration of the other prisoners which Charlie and I had. Our first week behind the walls saw us receive close to a score of notes—"kites" they are called in prison slang—from fellow convicts, congratulating us on our fight against American capitalism and pledging solidarity in the fight.

And each one of these notes was passed or delivered to use at the risk of the writer or those who delivered it, being thrown in the "hole" (solitary confinement in the dungeon on bread and water) for a week or more, if they were caught. Gifts of tobacco (a precious commodity in prison) magazines, etc., came to us unsolicited.

And small wonder that the best of the prisoners were with us. Most of them workers, if their experiences on the outside had not instilled in them a hatred for the capitalist social system, the brutal treatment within the walls completed the process. For brutality is the key-note of the Ohio Penitentiary. Guards speak only to curse, and as often as not to brutally club into unconsciousness some luckless convict who has been guilty of the most minor infraction of prison rules.

On the other hand, if you are caught taking

an extra piece of bread at the table, smoking in your bunk, out of step in line, or doing any of a hundred things the authorities have decreed you may not do, the guard may prefer to turn you over to the tender mercies of the prison court.

A real parody on justice, this prison court. The usual procedure is reversed. You are punished first and then tried. You may try to sneak a piece of bread off the table at breakfast to help fill that void that you are sure to feel before noon on prison fare. The guard sees it or thinks he does. He calls you out and takes you over to the "hole." Here he strips you down to the overalls and underwear, makes sure you have no tobacco with you, and places you in an ingenious instrument of torture. This is a narrow cage of iron bars, measuring about 2½ by 2½ feet and 6 feet high, which is attached to the inside of the dungeon door. Once in this cage there you remain, unable to lie down or sit, forced to stand up right. If you are unfortunate enough to have to perform any of the normal bodily functions while in the cage— it is as my cell mate expressed it, "just too bad for you and your overalls both." There you stand until the next morning when court convenes. Then you are taken out and brought before the Deputy Warden for trial. He may find you guilty, and back you go to the hole for another day or more. He may find you not guilty, in which case off you go innocent and with your record clean, but with the scars of the cage still on your innocent back.

This brutal treatment, together with the fearful monotony of prison life, breaks men down, ages them, kills them in time. Day after day the same drab routine goes on. Up in the morning, march to breakfast, then march to work in the knitting mill. At night march to supper and then march back to be locked up in the cell. This was our routine, day after day. At night in the cell read magazines until nine and then to bed. I say "read magazines." We brought in with us some revolutionary books with the hope of doing a bit of studying. "Not these books," said the Deputy Warden, as he took from us the three volumes of "Capital" and our other books. Not even a scrap of paper to write on would they allow us.

Even under Czarism some differentiation was made between ordinary criminals and political prisoners. But not in America. Here the political prisoner is thrown in with the worst scum of the underworld. Forced to associate with degenerates, with diseased men. A syphilitic cell mate is a common occurrence. No radical literature is allowed. Even the Daily Worker is barred at the Ohio Penitentiary. No food, no tobacco, is allowed to reach the political prisoner from the outside. Far from being better treated the Communist is the subject for the worst brutality of debased and degenerate guards, anxious to gain the approbation of an ignorant and reactionary Warden.

Such is the Ohio State Penitentiary. Today Charlie Guynn and I are free after a month behind those gray walls. Lil Andrews has been released from the womens reformatory at Marysville, where conditions are even worse. We have been released on \$5,000 bond each pending action by the Court of Appeals. Will we go back in May to complete our ten-year terms or will we remain on the outside, fighting in the front ranks of the Ohio working class? The answer to this question depends solely on the workers of Ohio. Their mass power expressed in revolutionary action can alone protect us from the vengeance of the ruling class.