

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES, No. 11, January 14, 1972

Present: Breitman, Britton, Camejo, A. Hansen, J. Hansen,  
Jenness, Jones, Lovell, Novack, Sheppard, Stone

Visitors: Rose, Scott, Seigle

Chairman: Breitman

AGENDA:                                   1. Current Political Situation  
  2. Prison Work  
  3. YSA Convention  
  4. World Movement Report

1. CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

Breitman opened discussion.

General discussion.

2. PRISON WORK

Seigle reported (see attached).

Discussion.

Motion: To approve the report.

Carried.

3. YSA CONVENTION

Rose reported.

Discussion.

4. WORLD MOVEMENT REPORT

Camejo reported.

Discussion.

Meeting adjourned.

## REPORT ON WORK RELATING TO PRISONERS

One aspect of the current radicalization has been the development of radical consciousness within the prisons. Increasing numbers of prisoners are becoming interested in radical ideas and literature. The prison revolts have highlighted the new assertion of their humanity by prisoners, and their demands for more humane conditions and democratic rights.

Since the party convention, a number of branches have done work directed towards prisoners. Several branches have been able to send comrades to give talks to groups of prisoners at officially approved meetings. Some of the work has involved informal visits with individuals and groups who are interested in our ideas. All of this activity has been in response to requests from prisoners who have heard about us, primarily as a result of our election campaigns.

In addition, the national campaign has been able to get Linda Jenness to meet with groups of prisoners in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, following up on contacts that were made through local campaigns.

The Militant has a number of subscribers in prison, and seems to be read widely in the prisons where it gets in. The Militant's coverage of the prison revolts, conditions, etc., has also had a good reception, especially among radicalizing youth and Black people.

Because of the racial bias of capitalist "justice," and because of the leading role of Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano prisoner radicals in prison struggles, interest in the whole prison question is high in the Black communities and among other oppressed nationalities, as is sympathy for the demands of the prisoners.

The work that has been done, both on a local level and through the election campaign nationally, and through Militant sales, has been propaganda work. Our propaganda has had two areas of focus.

The first is the general concept of struggling to extend democratic rights to cover prisoners, as well as alleviate prison conditions. Democratic rights, which are supposed to apply to all citizens, should also apply to those who have been convicted of crimes, or who are in jail awaiting trial. This is similar to the concept of the "citizen soldier" which has been central to the struggles for GI civil liberties. Winning civil liberties for prisoners involves extending democratic rights to a sector of society which have been denied their rights as citizens, a sector which the ruling class does not view as protected by the Bill of Rights.

One of the central civil liberties questions in the prisons is winning the rights of inmates to receive any newspapers, magazines or books they want to read, and winning the right to unrestricted, uncensored correspondence.

The second focus of our propaganda has been to expose the function of prisons under capitalism as an instrument of class rule and national oppression, like the army, the police, the courts, etc. We have used the specific instance of the prison conditions and the prison rebellions to explain the nature of the capitalist state and the need for a socialist revolution.

Because this is a new area of activity, several questions have arisen about it. One purpose of this report is to present general guidelines concerning these questions.

I. It is important for the branches to maintain a proper set of priorities, and to keep work with prisoners in the perspective of overall party campaigns and branch tasks. The social weight of the prison population is less than that of the other movements in which we have been intervening. While there are important opportunities for us in this area, they are propaganda opportunities, to be taken advantage of primarily through the election campaign and our press.

II. We should avoid attempting to substitute our comrades or our party for an adequate legal aid or legal defense group, or for an effective social welfare organization for prisoners.

Frequently the prisoners we are in contact with have nowhere to turn for help in solving the numerous problems they are facing, and their first inclination is to appeal to us for legal help, help in obtaining references for parole, etc. There is a natural tendency on their part to ask us to help them out in a lot of ways which are beyond our means.

We can't provide lawyers, for example, although we can refer people to lawyers or organizations that might be able to provide legal help. In general, we can't become a source of character references, job offers, etc.

III. We have come in contact with prisoners who appear to be very serious about politics, who have read a good deal of our literature, and who agree with us politically. The question of membership has arisen in several instances.

At this time, our general policy is not to recruit prisoners to the party. Because of the material situation they are in, it is difficult for prisoners to function as party members, no matter how serious or disciplined they may be. More important, there are serious security questions which would be raised, both for the party and for the individual prisoner.

IV. We want to get our press into the hands of those prisoners seriously interested in our ideas. This is one of the best means we have for reaching them. However, it is beyond our means to make a general offer to large numbers of prisoners to receive our press.

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Both the SWP campaign and The Militant are filing lawsuits, which will be of national importance and will provide a focus for our work in defense of civil liberties for prisoners.

The SWP campaign is planning a suit to win the right to vote for certain prisoners. Although the right to vote of those convicted of felonies has been denied repeatedly by the courts, there has never been a clear ruling on the rights of those sentenced for misdemeanors, or of those simply awaiting trial. Most of those behind bars are not convicted felons.

In addition, The Militant is planning to file a suit to put an end to censorship of The Militant.

Both of these suits will be filed in a particular state, but they will have national significance, both legally and politically.

As soon as they are filed, full reports will be in The Militant.