



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Outside observers campaign for prison reform at Walpole Prison, U.S., 1973

7 March

1973

to: 13 July

1973

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Walpole, Massachusetts*

Location Description: *Walpole Prison*

Goals:

The Observer Program Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform (AHC)'s Observer Program planned to document prison conditions and guard abuses, and had as a goal demonstrating to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary. Prisoners had gathered under the interracial leadership of the National Prisoner Reform Association (NPRA). During the time of the Observer Program (OP), prisoners took over and ran the prison in a campaign with concrete goals to exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 180. Alternative communication system

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Peace

Group characterization:

- Civilian volunteers with the Observer Program

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform, which organized the Observer Program

Partners:

National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Reverend Edward Rodman, Phyllis Ryan, Junior Chamber of Commerce, Harvard students, Ed Rodman, Bill Owens

External allies:

John O. Boone (Corrections Commissioner), Black African Nations Toward Unity (BANTU), Cadet trainee guards

Involvement of social elites:

Corrections Commissioner John O. Boone

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Black African Nations Toward Unity (BANTU)
- Cadet trainee guards

- John O. Boone (Corrections Commissioner)
- National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA)
- Phyllis Ryan
- Reverend Edward Rodman

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Bill Owens
- Ed Rodman
- John O. Boone (exit)

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

It is not clear when the AFSC, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and Harvard students joined the campaign

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Walpole's prison guards, staff, and administration (excluding Corrections Commissioner John O. Boone)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents (147)

Walkouts (098) and Professional Strike (104)

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

On May 18th, guards and state police entered with guns and ammunition, bringing a violent end to the prisoners' nonviolent takeover of Walpole, but no members of the Observer Program (OP) were harmed.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Observer Program campaign experienced a large amount of growth. Over the course of the campaign, more than 1300 civilian observers came through Walpole Prison. However, they did not survive nor achieve their stated goals.

Walpole was a maximum-security prison in South Walpole, Massachusetts. The Observer Program's campaign to bring civilian volunteers into Walpole Prison formed part of a larger movement of opposition to cruelties of the prison system. It also

coincided with, and helped to support, a campaign by inmates at Walpole under a local chapter of the National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA) to take control of the prison. Read about the prisoners' nonviolent campaign in this database: "U.S. prisoners take control of Walpole Prison, 1973".

In the 1970s in the U.S., prison abolition was on the public agenda as an idea to consider. A 1971 prisoner takeover at Attica Prison acted as a lightning bolt by showing the horror of the prison yard. This context made possible both the recruitment of outside volunteer observers, as well as the prisoners' campaign. At Walpole, the context of the time also made possible the appointment of John O. Boone as Corrections Commissioner. Boone was a prison abolitionist who believed that prisons needed to be phased out, and by the time he arrived at Walpole, prisoners had already adopted nonviolent strategy to fight for small concessions during a back-and-forth of strikes and lockdowns.

On March 2, prisoners formally negotiated to end a work strike in return for the resignation of superintendent Raymond Porelle, and the allowing of 'citizen observers' to enter. Volunteers with the Observer Program first entered the prison on March 7. The Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform (AHC) – an interfaith community of white leftists committed to nonviolent social change—enlisted a small core of trusted volunteers to form their Observer Program (OP). It had a nine-member panel composed of former Walpole inmates, citizen observers, and its chairman was Reverend Ed Rodman, a radical young priest. The external board of the National Prisoner Reform Association (NPRA) (including the Black United Front (BUF) and Citizens and Relatives Concerned About Prisons (CARCAP)) also helped the AHC. Eventually, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) became a coordinating center for the OP and enlisted hundreds of volunteers.

Nevertheless, the authorization of outside observers to enter the prison hinged mainly upon pressure from prisoners, who hoped observers would help defend them against retribution by the guards. Reverend Rodman told Boone that well-trained citizens documenting actions inside the prison could promote stability, and suggested that Boone view the observers as a third party nonviolent interventionary force. However, guards saw observers much as the prisoners did—as allies to the inmates, offering assistance for a change process in a power relationship that was shifting to the disadvantage of the guards.

The controversy emerged as a tri-polar struggle between inmates, the guards, and Boone, with the first two using nonviolent tactics to force Boone to go along with their opposing demands. The correctional officers union responded to the terms of settlement between prisoners and Boone and the arrival of outside observers with an unprecedented walkout and strike of their own. On March 9, when the first observers took their posts, 50 guards refused to punch in, and the entire 3 o'clock shift walked off the job.

Guards issued a strike ultimatum on March 14, when they demanded Boone's immediate removal. Those that reported to work complained about the presence of civilian observers. They resented that individuals could monitor job performance and report violations of prison regulations, and felt ganged up on by the presence of formerly incarcerated individuals. On March 15, eleven prisoners were released from 10 Block and entered the general population; two hundred guards walked out of Walpole in an official guard strike. Guards that were normally present at all times in corridors left their positions entirely unattended. The guard's union continued to demand that Boone leave. Boone responded by suspending 150 of them for five days without pay.

Prisoners officially took control of Walpole Prison on the 15th, in a separate campaign with goals to exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary.

During the time when guards staged their work stoppage, the prisoners' union, the NPRA, established programs and democratically determined policies, as part of working toward their goal to exercise self-determination within the prison.

On the day that the old officers walked out, Boone recruited cadet trainee guards and put them through a training program to aid the observers in keeping the institution functioning. Unlike the guards, many cadets were young men of color who wanted to establish rapport with the prisoners and who felt responsibility to the population.

Prisoners requested more outside observers to come in and 'hold the place together.' The Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform (AHC) stepped up its efforts. Volunteer observers came to include members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Harvard

students volunteering with the Phillips Brooks House Association (PBHA), a social action organization at the college, also joined as observers. They talked to prisoners and reported seeing no violence while in Walpole. Phyllis Ryan, an organizer of the Observer Program and spokesperson for the AHC, stated that prisoners considered the observers helpful protection.

Volunteer observers were admitted in continuous regular shifts at 7am, 3pm, and 11pm. They had been trained not to discipline, give orders, argue with the guards, or hold keys. Their role was to observe activity, report any abusive situations, and witness how the NPRA ran the prison. Although female observers were not admitted inside the prison, they acted as shift coordinators. Male observers wore identifiable armbands, and moved freely throughout all areas of prison, free to talk with and even eat with prisoners. Observers left behind daily reports, from which accurate information was to be released to the press to counterbalance false reports by the guards. Despite their purported role as 'neutral coordinators,' observers quickly became inmate advocates. As allies more and more explicitly on the side of the change process, they interviewed prisoners (but not guards) in order to document and report guards' abuses.

As one observer noted, "When we visited Walpole, the prisoners had ended their work strike. The guards were still out. And we found a complex society at work, a society that puts out official state documents, records and printed forms, building materials, light handicrafts, license plates and 18,000 meals a day for its population...it has its workers, its employers, its organizations, its cooks, craftsmen, educators, even its artists." After their first week in the prison, observers compiled a list of complaints from the prisoners about prison condition. "The prisoners described being sprayed with fire extinguishers and being left behind locked solid steel doors rather than the customary grates. Guards would cut off the electricity... deny them showers, and put things in the food" (Bissonette).

Observers also documented the overmedication and denial of medical attention, noting that at times, the only way to get medical attention was to get stabbed or to slash one's wrists. As one observer reported following their shift, "It is imperative that none of the personnel formerly in Block 9 ever return. It's worth paying them to retire. The guards are the security problem."

Thanks to information provided by the OP, on March 10, the Boston Globe reported that Walpole prisoners were responsible for maintaining calm within the institution following the guards' walkout. By mid May, nearly 900 civilian observers had come through, a number that reached 1,300 by the end of the program.

While the prisoners' union bore responsibility for programs, industrial production, and conflict resolution, cadet trainee guards held the keys to the blocks. All the while, civilian observers monitored conditions and reported issues. 'Volunteers had demonstrated that impartial observers were more effective than the guards themselves, and the NPRA—not the Department of Corrections —was developing programming. The prison ran smoothly because the prisoners were in charge of the day-to-day mechanics of the prison, and they wanted it to run smoothly.' During the whole time of the nonviolent takeover, not a single outbreak of murder or rape occurred. Meanwhile, the Observers Program provided a lens into the world otherwise closed to society, and helped create opposition to prisons by channeling observations to the media.

On March 19, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ordered guards to return to the prisons. All were mandated to undergo retraining and learn new regulations, and their presence was initially confined to security control points such as the observation deck and the visiting room. Nevertheless, guards undermined the cadets and observers, and increased tension by disrupting the prisoner count, arbitrarily changing mealtimes, and slashing tires of civilian observers.

However, Governor Sargent and the public were putting pressure on Boone to regain control, put guards completely back at posts, and shut down the NPRA. Embarrassed by his perceived lack of control, Boone gave in to pressure and set up a task force to determine how to reintegrate guards to Walpole, with the NPRA excluded from negotiations. Members of the task force decided on a lockup and shakedown of the prison.

On May 18, the NPRA decided to use nonviolent direct action against the imminent lockup by having prisoners prop open cell doors so that guards could not close them by remote control. Observers still in the prison recorded that it was 'quiet as a morgue.' Nevertheless, when false reports of mass destruction reached the superintendent, he called in state police. Outside

allies Ed Rodman and state representative Bill Owens joined observers. After acting superintendent Walter Waitkevich commanded observers to assemble in the waiting room, guards and state police entered with guns and ammunition, and brought a violent end to the prisoners' nonviolent takeover of Walpole. Dellelo was beaten heavily and confined in a separate section.

Governor Sargent, who had initially hired Boone, fired him because he could not 'maintain a chain of command.' Following rumors of a riot, state troopers and corrections officers returned again with clubs and dogs on May 20. Observers were excluded during the shakedown, and although some returned afterwards, the civilian observer program was suspended for good in July.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

The Observer Program (OP) campaign overlapped with the prisoner takeover of Walpole under the organization of the National Prison Reform Association (NPR). Read about the prisoners' nonviolent campaign in this database: "U.S. prisoners take control of Walpole Prison, 1973". The context of the time was informed by the aftermath of a 1971 prisoner takeover at Attica Prison showed the horror of the prison yard and informed the climate at the time – 39 prisoners were left dead after state police regained control. Prisoners, their families, their allies, prison administrators, legislators and advocates resolved to pursue radical reform towards prison abolition. Many hoped to depopulate prisons and involve prisoners in the public discussion on solutions to crime.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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