

RACISM AMONG PRISONERS

It would be an oversimplification to attribute all the racism within the prison to the Machiavellian designs of the prison establishment. Racism among prisoners would be a problem even if it were not actively encouraged by guards:

On the streets I never was a racist. I was never down on the blacks. But here I have been forced to be a racist. I was told the first rule was that "you never talk with a black off the job." If you talked with a black you would be isolated by the rest of the whites and then attacked. The institution wants it that way because it makes it easier to control prisoners and it makes a strike almost impossible. But some of the prisoners don't need much encouragement from the institution. They made it perfectly clear to me when I got here that "if you associate with a nigger, we'll kill you." [Young white prisoner.]

If there is a white sissy who hangs out with blacks, he gets it from the whites. The same goes for blacks. If they see a brother hanging around with whites they call him an Uncle Tom. [Black prisoner.]

The strongest racist sentiments of any prisoner interviewed came from a white prisoner (quoted previously concerning guards' complicity in racial violence) who strongly supported the prison Nazi party:

Most of the blacks at San Quentin are mentally defective, lazy and vicious. I know that you disagree with me, but all you have to do is open your eyes and you will see. All that they want to do is play a game on whitey, live off of our backs. When I first got here ten years ago there was a real Nazi party with a real political outlook. If the spooks started anything, the Nazis went out and took care of things. They would stab a few spooks and get things under control so no real troubles would develop. If we had a strong party now, the blacks wouldn't start things so much. It really is the blacks or the Mexicans who start nearly all

of the trouble here. I know that for a fact. There was less race trouble ten years ago because of the Nazis. Since then they declined, and the race troubles have been steadily mounting.

Such virulent racism cannot be explained simply by the institutionalized racism of the prison. Many prisoners bring these attitudes with them and find prison a fruitful environment in which to act out their hostilities. But such flagrant, bitter racism is not characteristic of most of the prisoners I met at San Quentin. By and large, racism is the path of least resistance. It represents a response to the pressures and cues from the institution and the already existing racist relationships among the prisoners.

Recently, with the growth of a more sophisticated political awareness among some prisoners, there have been signs that racism may be breaking down and that interracial solidarity may be emerging, however feebly. The San Quentin strike of August, 1970, embodied an incipient form of this interracial unity, even though the strike ultimately collapsed amid racial conflict. The call for "Blue Power" was a statement of the class solidarity of prisoners across racial lines, and many men felt that for a short while Warren Wells managed to create some sense of solidarity. The strike at Folsom prison three months later (see Chapter 12) demonstrated even more impressively this new prisoner unity: for 19 days virtually all prisoners supported a strike and insisted upon its antiracist character.

A number of prisoners I spoke with at San Quentin expressed hope for the development of unity within the prison across racial lines. One Chicano prisoner who had already spent five and a half years in San Quentin said:

Naturally, when you are put here and you've never lived with blacks before, you don't like them. But in the past couple of years people have begun to realize that you have to work together. . . . Soledad has been a good lesson here. They are not having race riots there anymore. People are