

Racism in prison system is topic of Lawyers Guild meet

Special to the PDW

DETROIT — Human rights violations at the federal prison in Marion, Ill., and other prisons and the racism that has put disproportionate numbers of Afro-Americans in the nation's prisons were discussed at a recent luncheon of the Detroit chapter, National Lawyers Guild.

The speaker was Steven Whitman of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown. Since November 1983, nearly all of the approximately 350 prisoners have been kept locked in their cells for 23 hours each day. They eat meals there, and when a prisoner leaves his cell for a visit or a court appearance, he is handcuffed and shackled and escorted by three prison guards. Inmates are allowed no contact visits. Most have no access to work or exercise. Prisoners are sometimes chained, spread eagle

on their backs, for several days at a time.

Lockdown is sometimes imposed in a prison for a short time following an uprising, but authorities at Marion have made it the permanent mode of operation.

The Bureau of Prisons says that the prisoners at Marion are "the worst of the worst" — security level-6 prisoners who, by the violent nature of their crimes, by their records of violence towards guards or other prisoners while in prison, or by the likelihood of their attempting escape, pose a threat to the safe operation of any prison in which they are held.

But Whitman, who lectures at Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, disputes this. "By the Bureau's own admission in Congressional hearings, 80

percent of the prisoners at Marion are not rated at level 6," he said.

"Reasons for a prisoner's placement or transfer there can include the filing of lawsuits against the prison system or complaining too much about prison conditions, attempting to organize prisoners in such things as work strikes. Prisoners have also been placed in Marion because of the political nature of their crimes, including Leonard Peltier and Puerto Rican independence fighters."

Amnesty International has reported on well documented practices at Marion that violate every element of international standards for prison conditions. It is the only report in which Amnesty has ever criticized a U.S. human rights violation.

A study by Whitman of Bureau of Prison statistics revealed that Black Americans are six times as likely to go to prison in their lifetime. A higher proportion of Black Americans than of Black South Africans go to prison. Afro-American prisoners make up 70 percent of the total at Marion, compared to 55 percent nationwide.

Whitman warned that federal prison officials plan to use Marion's lockdown as a "model" for other prisons around the country. More information is available from the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, (312) 663-5056, 343 S. Dearborn Street, 1607, Chicago Ill. 60604.