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SHAWNEE UNIT - A CONTROL UNIT FOR WOMEN

In May of this year, a nationally coordinated mobilization against control units took place. The call was issued by the Puerto Rican and New Afrikan national liberation movements, the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML), and other solidarity organizations on the twentieth anniversary of the Attica Rebellion. The first control unit was also built 20 years ago, as part of a wave of repression carried out by the government against the upsurge of revolutionary and progressive movements in that period. The mobilization condemned the Marionization of prisons and the proliferation of control units. In the preceding months a process of education by the sponsors focused on:

- * The use of control units as tools of political repression. A past warden of Marion has stated: "The purpose of Marion control unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large."
- * The fact that the national oppression and white supremacy of U.S. society determine who is incarcerated in these units.
- * The brutal physical and psychological conditions in the control units.

There was no mention of women and women's control units in the mobilization's propaganda. The history of the use of control units against women, including the current federal incarnation, the Shawnee Unit at Marianna, Florida, was ignored. A false picture was projected -- that women are exempt from placement in control units; that Shawnee is not a control unit because it doesn't use the same physical brutality as men's control units.

This view undermines the struggle against control units. Important milestones are overlooked: the mobilization against the Cardinal Unit at Alderson, WV, and the national campaign to shut down the High Security Unit (HSU) at Lexington, KY. These efforts were significant because of the explicit political mission of these units: targeting women political prisoners and Prisoners of War from the Puerto Rican Independence Movement and white anti-imperialist movement.

Sidelining women as equal participants in the struggle to close all control units has deeper implications. It diminishes the importance of women's resistance. It ignores the brutality of psychological methods of control and behavior modification. It plays into the government mythology that women are more submissive and open to manipulation. And because a number of political prisoners and Prisoners of War have spent the majority of our sentences in control units, this omission further distances us from our movements, indirectly playing into the principle objective of the government: isolation. By isolation we don't mean the physical barriers created by any incarceration, but rather the lack of an organic relationship to the very movements and struggles that we were part of -- the activities for which we are imprisoned. By isolation we mean the turning of political prisoners into symbols to be remembered as historical leftovers of a more militant past, while ignoring them as continuing participants in today's progressive movements.

The government relies on secrecy and silence to accomplish its goals. This paper was written to break with the secrecy and silence on Shawnee Unit; to recognize women as equal participants in the struggle to shut down all control units;

and to be responsible to ongoing political struggle.

SHAWNEE IS A CONTROL UNIT

CEML, in "Walking Steel," defines a control unit as a "combination of physical conditions, the policies which determine who is sent there, and the overall purpose of the unit."

Shawnee Unit was opened by the BOP in August 1988, after the small group isolation experiment at Lexington HSU was shut down. The political and security mission of Shawnee is the same as that of the HSU: to control, isolate and neutralize women who, for varying reasons, pose either a political, escape, or disruption threat. Neutralization insures that the women imprisoned here will never leave prison with the full capacity to function. Central to the mission is the understanding that Washington can decide at any point to transfer any woman political prisoner or Prisoner of War here. The recent transfer of Laura Whitehorn is a case in point.

A distinct profile emerges: membership in or association with any of the national liberation movements, particularly the Puerto Rican and New Afrikan Independence Movements (as determined by the FBI); ongoing surveillance and counterinsurgency against the progressive movements; classification of political acts as "sophisticated criminal conspiracies," characterized by employment of armed struggle; and punishment for continued commitment to non-collaboration. Reflecting the centrality of the oppression of Black people in the history of the U.S., we have been told that we were designated here because of our conviction in or association with the so-called "Brinks Case." (Underlying all the charges in this case, now 11 years old, is the struggle for self-determination by Black people and active solidarity with this struggle by white anti-imperialists.) The unit serves as a public admonishment to those who would challenge the supremacy of the U.S. -- deterrence and isolation are central to its mission. It also serves to maintain control over all women in BOP prisons: in less than 24 hours, twelve women who were targeted as leadership of the recent demonstration by women at Lexington against police violence were transferred here.

Once a control unit is set up, it fulfills many needs. The BOP operates Shawnee with some flexibility. Protected witnesses, disciplinary cases, high profile individuals, members of various Colombian cartels, and women with successful escape histories are imprisoned here. What distinguishes them from the political prisoners is their ability to transfer out of Shawnee. Over the past year, there has been a massive movement out of the unit. But the political prisoners, despite repeated requests to be transferred, have been excluded from this.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL

To wash away the brutal image of the HSU, the BOP has created the deception that life at Shawnee is normal, not designed or manipulated. The physical plant is designed to deflect any concern from the outside about human rights abuses -- it looks comfortable and attractive. This appearance is a lie.

The women of Shawnee live in a psychologically assaultive environment that aims at destabilizing women's personal and social identities. This is true of the prison system as a whole; here it has been elevated to a primary weapon, implemented through a physical lay-out and day-to-day regimen that produce inward-

ness and self-containment. The unit is a small triangle with a small yard. Within this severely limited space, women are under constant scrutiny and observation. In the unit, cameras and listening devices (the latter are installed in every cell) insure constant surveillance and control of even the most intimate conversation. Lockdown is not necessary because there is nowhere to go, and individuals can be observed and controlled better while having the illusion of some mobility.

The fences around the yard -- the only place where one could have any sense that an outside world existed -- were recently covered with green cloth, further hammering into the women the sense of being completely apart and separate. It is one thing to be imprisoned in this tiny isolation unit for a year or two, another to be told one will be here for three more decades -- that this small unit will be one's world for the rest of one's life.

Compared to the other federal prisons for women, Shawnee is like being in a suffocating cocoon. What replaces visual stimulation and communication is TV. As in the Marion control unit, there is a TV in every cell -- the perfect answer to any complaints about isolation or boredom. TV provides the major link to the world -- a link which conveniently produces passivity and inculcates "family values."

The intense physical limitations are compounded by a total lack of educational, training, or recreational programs. At a time when such programs are being expanded at other women's prisons, here, at the end of the line, women are not worthy of even the pretense of rehabilitation. The geographical location of Shawnee makes contact with family and community an almost impossible task. Gradually, women here begin to lose their ability to relate to the outside world. As time moves on, frustration sets in, accompanied by alienation and despair. The result is the creation of dysfunctional individuals who are completely self-involved, unable to participate in organized social activities, and unprepared for eventual reintegration into life on the outside: women who resist less, demand less, and see each other as fierce competitors for the few privileges allowed.

Competition and individualism become the defining characteristics of personality distortion here. The staff seeks out the most needy personalities and molds them into informants. Unit life has been rocked by a number of internal investigations begun when individual prisoners "confided" in ambitious staff members. Snitching and cooperation are the pillars of the "justice system." Those that refuse to accept this standard of behavior are isolated and targeted by those that do. In the tiny world of the unit, this can have a massive effect on one's daily life.

A system of hierarchical privileges governs the unit and destroys any potential unity. Small comforts, such as personal clothing, have become the mechanism through which cooperation and collaboration are obtained. The latest wrinkle is the institution of "privileged housing" -- the arbitrary designation of a limited number of cells on the upper tier as a reward for acceptable behavior. This is classic behavior modification. The unit is in a constant state of uproar over the daily moves that enforce the fall from privileged status.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND RACISM

There are close to 90 women imprisoned at Shawnee: 1/3 Black women from various parts of the world, 1/3 Latin women, 1/3 white women, and a very small number of Native American women. The numerical balance belies the hegemony of white supremacist ideology. As outside the walls, a permanent conflict exists between Black people

and those in power. Prisoners experience and are affected by the sharpening of conflict on the outside and the increasing national oppression experienced by Black people in particular. Events in California have given focus to the discontent and heightened the contradictions. Since May, an unprecedented number of Black women have been put in the hole -- more than the total for the past two years. Currently, five women from the unit are in the hole; all are Black. And while the administration says that they do not deal with gangs, "Boyz 'N the Hood" and "Jungle Fever" were banned from the prison after the Aryan Brotherhood protested.

A strict segregationist policy determines who gets the jobs. After four years, no Black women has ever worked for education or recreation, except in janitorial jobs. It has taken just as long to place a Black woman in commissary and to promote one woman to be a trainer in the UNICOR factory. All Black staff have left the unit, eliminating the small cushion they provided. This is significant, as staff in the federal system determine everything from access to family to release conditions.

Racism governs how religion can be practiced. Islam, Judaism, and Native American religions are either totally ignored or marginalized. One cannot help but notice this, since there is a daily diet of fundamentalist Protestant and Catholic services, seminars and retreats.

SUPEREXPLOITATION OF WOMEN'S LABOR

Like B block at Marion, there is no productive labor at Shawnee besides UNICOR. Unit life is organized to facilitate the functioning of the Automated Data Processing (ADP) factory. Nearly 40 women work here, twelve hours a day and five more hours on Saturday. The forced rhythm of this work has made the ADP factory the most profitable UNICOR operation in the BOP for its size. The complete lack of any other jobs, the need for funds, the lack of family support, the enormous expense of living in Shawnee, all push women into UNICOR, into intense competition and into an acceptance of their exploitation. Unlike general population prisons, Shawnee prisoners are not even permitted to work in jobs maintaining the physical plant. Removing productive labor is an element in destroying human identity and self-worth.

THE USE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PRISON IS INCREASING

The recent physical attacks by male guards at Lexington, and a similar incident here at Shawnee, illustrate the marked tendency towards using greater force to control women prisoners. While lower security women are being sent to minimum security facilities, those left in high security prisons will be more and more vulnerable to physical attack -- justified by being characterized by the BOP as "dangerous."

MISOGYNY AND HOMOPHOBIA

Women in prison are at the very bottom. The misogyny and contempt for women in the society as a whole are compounded by the way the prison system is organized to exploit and utilize women's oppression. The BOP characterizes some women as "dangerous" and "terrorist" (having gone beyond the bounds of acceptable female behavior in the U.S.), making them the target of particularized repression, scorn and hatred. To be classified maximum security is to be seen as less than human, by definition not eligible for 'rehabilitation.'

All women's prisons operate based on the all-pervasive threat of sexual assault, and the dehumanizing invasion of privacy. Throughout the state and federal prison system in the U.S., invasive "pat searches" of women by male guards insure that a woman prisoner is daily reminded of her powerlessness: she cannot even defend her own body.

In the control unit, there is absolutely no privacy: windows in cell doors (which cannot be covered), patrolling of the unit by male guards, and the presence of the bathrooms in the cells guarantee this. The voyeuristic nature of the constant surveillance is a matter of record: in the past year alone, there have been three major internal investigations of sexual harassment and misconduct by male officers -- including rape.

Programs that exist in other women's prisons, addressing the particular needs of women, are deemed frivolous at Shawnee. Most women here are mothers, but no support at all is given to efforts to maintain the vital relationship between mother and child. Similarly, if Shawnee were not a control unit, then education, recreation, religious and cultural programs should be on a par with those at Lewisburg, Leavenworth, and Lompoc (three men's high security prisons). But not a single program available in those prisons is available here.

The median age of the women here is 37 -- a situation distinct from any other women's prison. Nearly everyone is doing more than 15 years; more than ten women are serving life sentences without parole. Menopause is the main medical problem in the unit. Menopause is an emotional as well as a physiological process. Ignoring this is a pillar of misogynist Western medicine. In the repressive reality of Shawnee, refusal to recognize and treat the symptoms of menopause becomes a cruel means of punishment and an attack on the integrity of one's personality.

Security determines all medical care. Two women who have suffered strokes here were both denied access to necessary treatment in a hospital: a life-threatening decision, made solely for "security reasons."

Intense isolation and lack of activities mean that the loving relationships that provide intimacy and comfort to women in all prisons are of heightened importance here. Until recently, a seemingly tolerant attitude towards lesbian relationships was actually a form of control. For lesbian relationships to function without disciplinary intervention by the police, the women had to negotiate with, and in some instances work for, the staff. This tolerance was viewed as necessary because the relationships served as a safety valve for the tensions and anger in the population. As a result of the system of police-sanctioned tolerance, people tended to elevate the individual relationships above any collective alliances that might endanger the administration's rule over the unit.

This situation served to increase the already intense homophobia in the population. A new administration has now ended the tolerance, and lesbian women are now suffering greater harassment and discrimination. A witch hunt is underway to identify lesbians and couples engaging in homosexual behavior.

Together with racism, misogyny and homophobia define conditions here. When coupled with the repressive practices of a control unit, psychological disablement can result -- fulfilling the Shawnee mission.

CONCLUSION

Partly as a result of the astronomic rise in the number of women in prison and the resulting public interest in women's prisons, and partly as a result of the struggle against the Lexington HSU, the BOP has to be very careful not to appear to be brutal in its treatment of women prisoners. The investigations of the HSU by Amnesty International, the Methodist Church, the ACLU and others struck a nerve in Washington. The experiment carried out within the wall sof the HSU failed because of the personal and political resistance of those inside and outside the walls. But this defeat did not deter the BOP from its stated goals. It just drove them to hide them cosmetically behind a veneer of new paint and the momentary elimination of the most notorious abuses. The BOP always denies the truth of its workings. It denies the existence of control units and this unit in particular, not even listing it in the BOP Register of Prisons. Nevertheless, Shawnee is the present women's version of the Marionization of the prison system. The next one is supposed to be opened in North Carolina in 1994. The movement should not fall into the trap and ignore the particular control strategy aimed at women. Uncovering and exposing the reality that Shawnee Unit is a control unit will contribute to the movement against all control units.

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