

# *Female Political Prisoners and Anti-Imperialist Struggles*

*Susan Rosenberg*

---

Dear Editors,

Greetings of solidarity.

Thank you for asking me to write for your newsletter. You ask are there political prisoners in the U.S. prisons, and you ask me to write about my own experiences. Definitely the answer to the first is YES. There are over 150 political prisoners in U.S. prisons. We are in almost every federal prison in the country and spread throughout different State prison systems. I define a political prisoner as someone whose beliefs or actions have put them into direct conflict with the U.S. government, or someone who has been targeted by the government because of his/her beliefs and actions. While this is a somewhat generic description, it complies with international legal definitions. The other grouping of people who are in prison who are political are the prisoners of war from the Puerto Rican and New Afrikan/African-American liberation movements. These are individuals who make that claim under international law in pursuit of the recognition of their national liberation struggles for self-determination. The political prisoners and POW's in the U.S. who have struggled for human rights and social liberation — people who come from movements that range from the anti-imperialist left to the Native American struggle for sovereignty have all been treated by the government as political dissidents, but have been denied the dignity of recognition as political prisoners. Rather, we have been criminalized or wrongly defined as 'terrorists'. We have been repressed to the maximum.

The criminal justice system has been subverted into the main counter-insurgency mechanism of the state to “bury us alive.” The government denies that the laws are applied for their political agenda; they deny that sentence length and manipulation of parole release are applied to the maximum depending on the content of the political beliefs of the prisoners; they deny that we are designated to spend years in isolation/control units *because* we are political. A case in point: Donald Bray bombed ten abortion clinics, three of which had people on the premises, none with

*Susan Rosenberg*

warning calls. He was released after serving forty-six months. Tim Blunk and myself were convicted of weapons possession (not use) and were sentenced to fifty-eight years with recommendations of no parole. At our sentencing the judge told us we would have plenty of time to read *The God That Failed*. We are now entering our sixth year in prison. This sentence was the longest ever given for this particular offense. If one is from the right it shakes down one way and if one is from the left it shakes down differently. This is simply unjust.

If I can change here...

Picture: An underground basement containing sixteen cells painted all white, with no natural light. Wire mesh covering all windows making a view out impossible. No sound from outside. Eleven large rotating surveillance cameras. Electronic gates controlled from a command center in another building. Constant surveillance and controlled movement supervised by specially trained prison guards. Infrequent family visits. Two ten-minute phone calls a week that are later listened to, recorded, transcribed, analyzed and forwarded to other law enforcement agencies for analysis. Sexual intimidation and constant harassment by male guards. Never more than five women in this place. A psychological prison (torture center) in Uruguay? A scene from the film 'A Clockwork Orange?' No. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) High Security Unit (HSU) at the women's federal correctional institution in Lexington, Kentucky, which opened in October, 1986.

The HSU was officially shut down on August 15, 1988. During the almost two years it was operational, it held three women political prisoners: Alejandrina Torres (a Puerto Rican Independentista and Prisoner of War); Silvia Baraldini (an Italian national and anti-imperialist convicted of participating in the 1979 prison liberation of Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur); and myself, Susan Rosenberg (a North American anti-imperialist convicted of weapons possession). Two other social prisoners — Debra Brown (currently on death row in Ohio) and Sylvia Brown (currently at the Marianna maximum security women's unit) were also subjected to the experiment. The administration unofficially informed the political women that we could only be considered for transfer into general population if we would renounce our political affiliations and beliefs. At the same time, the two social prisoners were told that if they did not associate with the political women their stay in the HSU would be considerably shortened. None of the political women were placed in the HSU for disciplinary infractions committed while in prison.

The HSU came to symbolize the U.S. government's hypocrisy: while it claimed that it had no political prisoners in its prisons, the HSU was

the first explicitly political prison. It was the subject of militant opposition initiated by the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, an opposition which included groups ranging from social justice-oriented church groups to radical women's and lesbian groups. The HSU was condemned by Amnesty International as 'small group isolation', an internationally recognized form of psychological torture — and it was closed officially by a court ruling from the legal challenge in *Baraldini v. Thornburgh*. Judge Barrington Parker concluded in his decision, "It is one thing to place persons under greater security because they have escape histories and pose special greater risks to our correctional institutions. But consigning anyone to a high security unit for past political associations they will never shed unless forced to renounce them is a dangerous mission for this country's prison system to continue". *On September 8, 1989 the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington D.C. overturned the Parker decision.*

The appeals court held that the government is free to use the political beliefs and association of prisoners as a basis for treating us more harshly and placing us in maximum security conditions. Further, the appeals court ruling means that no court can question or dispute the prison's decisions, even if those decisions explicitly involve the prisoner's politics or political identity.

This legal decision gives official sanction to the BOP to place political prisoners into control units. A control unit is a prison block within a prison. There is no movement in the units, and they are designed to break the prisoner through sensory deprivation and control. The control unit is the U.S. equivalent of the West German or British 'dead wings' or 'white cells'. The appeals court ruling will also affect Marion penitentiary for men, where prisoners have been locked in their cells twenty-three hours a day for over five years. Marion has also been condemned by Amnesty International, and it is also used as a control unit for political prisoners and prisoners of war. While Marion is supposedly a punishment facility, a growing number of political prisoners have been designated there directly from trial. The new Lexington legal decision allows the BOP to build more control units and to carry out this 'mission' against the government's political opposition. All the government has to do is label someone a 'terrorist' or a 'security risk' and they can be subject to the most repressive prison conditions and human rights violations.

The BOP never acknowledged the condemnation of the conditions at the HSU. They continued to maintain that the conditions were 'humane'. They never complied with the original court order enjoining them to transfer any of us into general population. Instead, they built a new 'maximum security' unit for women inside the men's federal prison in Marianna, Florida. The 'mission' of the BOP at Lexington will

*Susan Rosenberg*

be carried on in a slightly more palatable form at Marianna. This 'mission' is one part of the overall program of the BOP to increase control, regimentation, and repression against all women in prison.

Since 1980, a growing number of women have been arrested and given long sentences for political activities against the government, including Puerto Rican, Black/New Afrikan and North American revolutionaries. Now that the transfer of political prisoners to the Marianna prison has been approved by the appeals court decision, it is just a matter of time before some, if not all, are sent there.

What happened as a result of the Lexington experiment is that the definition of 'general population' for 'maximum security' women underwent a drastic change. Restrictions increased ten-fold, and any semblance of parity between women and men is gone. Just as the Marion lockdown pulls the whole prison system towards greater repression, so too does the Lexington experiment.

After five years in U.S. prisons and jails, over three and a half of which I have spent in either solitary confinement or small-group isolation, I have reached the conclusion that in order to secure our human rights we must actively struggle for our political identities and commitments. To do otherwise is to succumb to the war of attrition being waged by the government against all of us. This 'war' being the length of our lives versus the government's counter-insurgency strategy of live burials through life sentences and isolation. In this conflict of political prisoner versus government we are no different than our counterparts around the world. I have also concluded that because the U.S. government is faced with a contradiction between its democratic facade and its own need to utilize a permanent state of repression, the abuses and violations against prisoners is subject to pressure, more through political and social action than through the courts.

Venceremos,  
Susan Rosenberg\*

*\*Susan Rosenberg is also a Resistance Conspiracy Case defendant. The Resistance Conspiracy Case is a conspiracy trial against six long-time political activists charged in conspiring to "Change, protest, and influence U.S. foreign and domestic policies through violent and illegal means." The indictment includes four bombings of U.S. government and military installations where property was damaged but no injuries occurred. One of the acts charged is the bombing of the U.S. Capitol after the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. This political showtrial is expected to begin in the spring of 1990. [Editor]. Reprinted with the kind permission of the editorial staff at *The Critical Criminologist*.*