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## “Revolutionary Literature = Contraband”

- Mumia Abu-Jamal

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*The people enjoyed real freedom of thought  
The masses' rights were respected;  
The few who insisted on publishing things  
Were the only ones effected.*

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)

Heine's insightful expression of state repression versus peoples 'rights', is not locked in granite, reflecting one fleeting point in time. The Germanic poet's sentiments equally apply to today's reality, specifically those in several American prisons, where an increasing number of prisoner-subscribers to the radical weekly, *Revolutionary Worker (RW)*, are being told by prison censorship bodies, and by some courts, that the *RW* will not be allowed.

The *Revolutionary Worker* is the organ of the Chicago-based Revolutionary Communist Party U.S.A., a body which embraces a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought.<sup>1</sup> *RW* is a colorful, expressive tabloid that offers national and global news analysis from a radical slant. The cover, centerfold, and back page are often multicolored. The writing style is breezy, colloquial, attempting an open 'average Joe' tone, free of puzzling jargon. Its layout is often loose, with little use for the bars, linings and/or graphs of many American newspapers, as reflected perhaps best in the *Wall Street Journal*. *RW* graphics tend to blend with the text, as in a recent instance where a three-quarter page length photo of an American Republican Cabinet official was depicted with a reptilian forked tongue slithering out of a toothy smile. *RW* can be entertaining, as much for its offbeat writing, as its creative, provocative graphics.

*RW* may be the antithesis of the tight staid *Wall Street Journal*. Perhaps that is why over 500 prisoners from some thirty U.S. prisons subscribe to it.

Perhaps that is one reason why, intermittently, since late May 1985, and totally, since October 1987, *RW* has been deemed

*verboten* at Huntingdon State Prison in south-central Pennsylvania.

May 13, 1985 marked the long-planned police assault against, and aerial incendiary bombing of, the Philadelphia homes and headquarters of the Black Naturalistic Move Organisation, leaving smoldering ashes of carnage and death of men, women and children behind. Scores of homes were razed by fire. Many radical and mainstream publications covered the urban holocaust, each from its own political perspective. The spectrum ranged from the conservative *U.S. News and World Report*, which decried the massive property losses, whilst opining that the fact that Philadelphia's mayor was Black was indicative that racism was not a factor in the bombing; to the *RW* which interpreted the 'Nightmare on Osage Ave.' as state terrorism launched against a Black Rebel clan and fronted by a Negro puppet politician, in hock to his very soul to the ruling class. To be sure, a number of radical, leftist papers featured remarkable coverage reflecting an extraordinary event. But, after the smoke cleared, few adopted an editorial, ongoing stance on the Move Massacre. Fewer still provided reduced rate or free subscriptions to indigent prisoners. *RW*, among others (notably the *Workers Vanguard*, organ of Spartacist League, U.S.A.), did all three.

The *U.S. News and World Report* was never censored; *RW* was censored often. At Huntingdon, *RW* papers were repeatedly seized, based upon a section of Administrative Directive 814, which prohibits publications "which advocate violence, insurrection or guerrilla warfare against the government or which create a clear and present danger within the context of the Correctional Institution." (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Admin. Directive, Sec. IV.A.3).

Since October 1987, some thirty prisoner-subscribers at Huntingdon have been totally denied their weekly *RW*, based upon the pretext cited above. The stated purpose of the Directive 814 is to give wide latitude to inmate subscribers of publications to satisfy the educational, cultural, informational, religious, legal and philosophical needs of prisoners.

Huntingdon subscribers fall within a wide range: Black Nationalists, Prison Activists, Anarchists, Move Rebels and Socialists are

among the thirty-odd individuals who routinely pass *R W* on to other interested readers.

The writer, despite prolonged *pro se* litigation in the U.S. District Court, and repeated institutional requests for a clear statement of what material was deemed offensive to censors, was never provided an answer stating what was objectionable. Repeated appeals netted *pro forma* responses, which woodenly cited the relevant rule supposedly violated, but not the material found to be objectionable, nor why.

Huntingdon Prison, located in Pennsylvania's rural, white, central counties, bears a black inmate population of over fifty percent (*Legislative Budget and Finance Committee Report*, Vol. II, June 1988: 28).<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania has an African-American population of about ten percent, akin to the U.S. population as a whole.

Only after the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) –Prisoners Revolutionary Literature Fund (PRLF), and interested civil attorneys made inquiries of government officials did a "reason" emerge for the total ban visited upon issues of *RW*. The culprit, censorship officially informed PRLF spokespersons, was a brief announcement on page two of every issue, titled "3 Main Points", authored by RCP Chair Avakian. Specifically, one point rankles censors: "The system we live under is based on exploitation -- here and all over the world. It is completely worthless and no basic change for the better can come about until this system is overthrown." Here then, 'the clear and present' danger. Accordingly, *R W* has been totally banned at Huntingdon. Since September 1988, another prison has joined the *RW* ban-wagon, namely, Lewisburg Federal Prison at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. By contrast, one of America's largest prison systems, New York State, specifically allows *RW* and states as much in its media review guidelines).<sup>3</sup>

Recently, editors at *RW* excluded the '3 Main Points' from selected issues. Did this mean *RW* was no longer excluded? It did not. Reportedly, the September 5, 1988 issue did not feature the '3 Main Points'. On September 23, 1988, subscribers were given censorship notices rejecting that issue on the identical grounds noted above, a strong suggestion that the given objections are purely pretext. Is the actual basis a political distaste for a publication which unabashedly names this system as imperialistic,

and exploitative? Does this degree of censorship impact upon the right wing, often racist, publications at Huntingdon?

White prisoner-subscribers here receive *White Aryan Resistance (WAR!)*; *NAA WP News* (National Association for Advancement of White People); *Thunderbolt*; *National Vanguard (N. V.)*, and the like, periodically and relatively hassle-free. The author has reviewed *WAR!* And *ATTACK!*, organs of the White Aryan Resistance and the National Alliance (from Arlington, Virginia), which call for a "revolution" against "this corrupt system".<sup>4</sup> One issue of *Attack!* (No 12, 1972) features "Revolutionary Notes - 7" which boasts of the merits and limitations of a number of small arms, from the 9mm (SW) to the .30 M1 Carbine, complete with illustrations, and descriptive texts. These articles, some 150 of them, deal with paramilitary matters, cultural enhancement of European values, and scandalous portrayals, via caricature and cartoon, of African, Indian, and Jewish peoples. Indeed, one article from a 1984 compilation describes *DerFuhrer*, Adolph Hitler, as "Kind", "appealing" and even "maudlin"! These materials are free from censorship. Radical materials which criticize the U.S. Empire are freely and routinely censored.

White prisoners may subscribe to fascist-oriented materials, which deify Hitler, belittle (or praise) the World War II Holocaust of millions of Jews, Gypsies, Communists, and others, and liken Jews to stereotypical shylocks, and Africans to servile Sambos, without significant comparative censorship, as afflicts *RW*. Perhaps more significantly, literature of this type supports psychic and racial barriers between prisoners, and inhibits development of any degree of political/ideological unity amongst prisoners vis-a-vis the administrators. As in the "free world", racism is a valuable tool of division which rulers use to manipulate the ruled.

Pornography, soft and hard-core, also circulates quite freely here. Prisoners routinely receive and circulate materials depicting a provocative panoply ranging from male/female penile-vagina sex, penile-anal sex, and oral sex; to homosexual oral, anal and digital sex; to human/bestial sex. In a state where conjugal visits have never been allowed, and where the very notion of penitentiary was initially conceived and implemented under strong Quaker influence,<sup>5</sup> prisoners may fantasize to ones

hearts content about myriad sexual couplings, but no more. Presently, eight States and a number of countries, Canada, European and Third World, provide conjugal visits. In the State where America's Constitution was molded, written and ratified, and where the Pennsylvania Constitution specifically grant broad press freedoms,<sup>6</sup> the *RW* stands victim to a state initiated total ban at Huntingdon. As the Move Rebels of Philadelphia were excepted from the expansive guarantees of the United States Pennsylvania constitutions as reflected by the May 13, 1985 police bombing so too, the Free Press Rights boasted in both Constitutions, apparently does not apply to *RW*. Add another log to the fire.<sup>7</sup>

Prisoner-subscribers to the Black Nationalist Monthly, *Burning Spear*, published by the Oakland, California-based African Peoples Socialist Party, face a similar ban at Huntingdon, but the *Spear* is not banned by other state prison media bodies.<sup>8</sup> The *Spear* offers news and analysis on political, social and cultural issues affecting the global Black community. The *Spear* too is banned. Appeals to prison administrators have resulted in as little specific responses, as in the case of *RW* censorship appeals.

What of court challenges to this wave of censorship? The federal courts, having been duly Reaganized, offer poor prospects for a *pro se* prisoner-litigant, who pits his meager resources and research tools against the computerised, professional arsenal of government counsel.

The naming of conservatives to the Federal Bench during the Reagan Administration leaves the majority of the bench with an ideological bent of "deference" to the executive branch, with little appreciation of individual and/or prisoners rights, as preserved in the Bill of Rights. This bodes ill for the impoverished, the imprisoned, the powerless, who dare to believe the lofty rhetoric that resonates within the Constitution, or more importantly, try to apply it.<sup>9</sup>

As the issues raised here address far more than the narrow question of "prisoner's rights", but rather impinge upon the First Amendment rights of publishers of alternative and radical publications, it is the publishers who must join in the struggle with prisoner-subscribers, to liberate the minds of men from the mental shackles of an exploitative, oppressive system. There is no safe

middle ground. Until publishers recognize their principled, interwoven interests lie with those who read, and thus consume their product, the corporate major media will, by portraying crucial censorship issues in terms of yet another "prisoner's rights" case, marginalize and obfuscate its impact and import.

Poet Heine's insightful observation, cited in this article's opening, bears reflection. He shows, in poetic clarity, how an increasingly repressive state camouflages its acts, with grandiose, glorious and utterly hypocritical words.

Incredibly, it would be easier for prisoners at Huntingdon to receive an edition of *Barricada* from Managua (I know a subscriber here of the Sandinista's English edition), than to get a copy of Chicago's *RW*. There's the pity. As with every assault on folk's rights by this system, resistance must be the response. This article is one form. How you, the reader, may opt to respond may be another.

"The worst kind of tyranny is that over the  
mind."  
Anonymous

A people can never acquiesce to the State's imposition of mental contraband.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup>Although at first glance such a tripartite grouping (i.e. Marx - Lenin - Mao Tse- Tung) may appear somewhat unorthodox, the revolutionary Communist Party/U.S.A. is of the view that Mao Tse-Tung thought, or the political philosophical view of the late chairman, have enriched marxist theory, and further, that the present pro-western regime in Beijing is deeply revisionist

<sup>2</sup>The *Legislative Budget and Financial Committee Report* places Black inmates at fifty-two percent of Huntingdon's population; the statewide figures for the Black inmate population is fifty-seven percent. These figures count Hispanics as "whites", so the statistics are conservative.

<sup>3</sup>See New York Directive 4572. Sec. II.H.6., which states, in part, "...publications such as *Revolutionary Worker* shall generally be approved".

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<sup>4</sup>See "Why Revolution?" *Attack!* No.6, 1971.

<sup>5</sup>The world's first 'penitentiary' was opened in Pennsylvania in 1790 as the Walnut Street Jail, based upon 'penitence.' This "Philadelphia System" was copied globally (Takagi, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>The United States Constitution, Amendment One and the Pennsylvania Constitution, First Article, both promise free press rights.; the latter in Article II, Section 7 notes, "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the invaluable rights of man" (See *Pennsylvania Declaration of Rights and Constitution*).

<sup>7</sup>Both a state and federal grand jury declined to indict any officials involved in the May 13th Move Massacre; nine Move people presently serve 100 year sentences for allegedly killing a cop in 1978, despite admitted knowledge of their innocence.

<sup>8</sup>A notarized affidavit of a *Spear* subscriber showing that *Spear* is not censored at another prison accompanied this article (ed.).

<sup>9</sup>On May 15, 1989, a predominately Reagan-appointed majority of the United States Supreme Court held prison officials needed "greater flexibility" in determining which publications to censor. *Abbot v. Thornburgh* makes it easier for federal prison wardens to exclude critical, and predominately leftist material.