

feature

Racism thrives in Canada's prisons

by Dan Robins

MONTREAL (CUP) — I asked Ross Stevens, a Black man who spent almost ten years in a variety of Canadian prisons, to what extent race is an issue in jail.

"The maximum amount," he said. "Like on the streets of South Africa."

"It's like every day a person will call you a nigger or make a joke, put a picture of a monkey on your door, or a jungle or something," he said. "But you can't really let something like that bother you, because if they see that gets to you then you get monkeys on your door every day."

'Loose', who has done about twenty years in Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia prisons, had a different perspective. He argued that most of the problems facing Canadian prisoners affect all prisoners, regardless of race.

But he also had lots of troubles with racist inmates and guards. "When I first went [to Dorchester, in New Brunswick], they told me, 'We don't want no niggers here,' and I said, 'I ain't going nowhere.' They can call me all the names, as long as they don't put their hands on me, then I have to defend myself."

"If you don't stand up for your rights, they'll walk all over you," he said.

VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION

An Ontario commission looking into systemic racism in the province's prisons released an interim report on Feb. 2, detailing many of these problems.

For instance, the report says, prison officials control what social groups Black prisoners can form, what music they can listen to, what magazines they can subscribe to and even what hair products they can have. (Believe it or not, Black prisoners even have trouble getting appropriate combs.)

Policies are applied discriminatorily, so that pregnant Black prisoners aren't given the same considerations that pregnant whites are, while Blacks are streamed out of prison

education programs and into menial jobs. In many prisons, these policies have gone as far as outright racial segregation. In Quebec's LeClerc prison, for instance, nine of the twelve blocks are whites-only. One "Black" floor is known as "the Jungle".

"There's only certain wings where a Black man can go," Stevens remembered. "If they just took me and put me in another wing, there's no question that I would have a fight within an hour."

This racial control makes it almost impossible for prisoners to organize against prison racism. A group in LeClerc formed an organization called Black Inmates Fellowship Association in order to raise awareness of racial issues in prison. For whatever reason, those who took on leadership roles in the group were quickly transferred out of the prison or stuck in solitary.

The Ontario commission concluded that such problems could not exist without the complicity of officials high up in the prison hierarchy.

Though these officials may not be as overtly racist as prison guards (many of whom have not figured out that "nigger" is an insult), they are more often just not interested in solving the problems of people who society has already given up on.

"The administration tries to be color-blind, but that way they don't see the problems," said Marie Beemans, a member of the board of directors of the Church Council on Justice and Corrections and for over 20 years a prisoners' rights activist.

"They don't care," said Loose. "All they do is lock you up and make sure you do your time."

ISOLATION

Stevens and Loose agreed that prisons far from large cities are the worst. Often guards have no experience dealing with people of color and immigrants, and the tiny number of Black people incarcerated in these areas prevents them from effectively banding together against racists.

Because of the racism and ignorance among prison authorities, support is generally geared towards white Christians. While this falls heaviest

on aboriginal prisoners, it still serves to further isolate Blacks from their communities (and their lawyers).

This has been especially true at the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario, the only facility for federally-sentenced women. Kingston is not a particularly diverse city, and prisons there are looked upon as more of an industry than a social issue. Even if there were adequate support groups in Kingston, though, few of the prisoners there would ever get a chance to see their families.

"When I first went [to Dorchester], they told me, 'We don't want no niggers here.'"

In April 1990, a federal task force recommended that the P4W be replaced with five regional centres and a facility specifically for native prisoners. This was meant to bring women closer to their families and communities, while also organizing the institutions in a way that recognized that women in prison are rarely a risk to society.

But Montreal didn't bid for the Quebec institution, and instead it's getting built in remote Joliette — where there are no established Black, immigrant or even English communities, ensuring that marginalized

women will be far from support. Even worse, it's next to impossible to get to Joliette by public transit.

Marie Beemans argues that because the people targeted by the justice system tend to be uneducated and insecure (a large majority were physically or sexually abused as children), jamming them together in prison creates an environment ripe for racial violence.

"You've got people with less education, more insecurities, more problems. They tend not to associate on the outside, but in prison they're thrown together. If you don't get along on the outside, you can go home or go out with your friends, but not in prison," she said. "When you've got a situation like racism, it gets worse. And the guards aren't the brightest so they tend to be racist too."

COMMUNITY RESPONSES

When the prison system is done destroying people, community groups have to pick up the pieces. While there are government-funded programs, they tend to focus on integrating people back into society by maintaining control over them.

Loose decided to spend his whole term in prison rather than live outside while still reporting to the cops.

"They said, 'You gotta take a urine test,'" he said. "I said, 'How is the urine test run?' They said, 'One day, if they see you on the street and they say, 'Heh, we want you to take a urine test,' you have to go. And if you fail the urine test, automatically you're back inside.'"

Egien Scotland, the director for youth programming at the Montreal Black Community Centre, is trying to provide more empowerment oriented resources.

He's writing letters to parole boards letting them know that if Black prisoners are paroled early, they will have a place to go for help in finding housing, employment, education, and other referrals. He's presently trying to find employers willing to commit themselves to hiring Black ex-cons, while also looking for funding.

But by and large, community support, for both Black ex-cons and prisoners, has been disappointing. Beemans recalled an incident when a black inmate was beaten up by two guards in Tanguay, a Quebec provincial prison. Black community groups were reluctant to support her, said Beemans. (The two guards were later suspended after sexually assaulting a white prisoner.)

Stevens said the key to eliminating racism in prison is education, specifically for prison guards and staff who have no experience dealing with people of other cultures.

"I think if you could educate those people more and have them treat a racial situation with professionalism instead of saying, 'Ah, we don't want to hear it,' then it would be better," he said.

If we are to learn to deal humanely with crime, however, perhaps the most important education will have to happen outside prison walls. Getting sent to prison has little to do with criminality and lots to do with being already marginalized, whether by race, class or level of education.

If people realized that, maybe we could start going after the folks who continue to exploit a privilege based in centuries of racial hatred, while dismantling the system that keeps them powerful.

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