

John Bowden has been at the forefront of the British prison struggle for more than 2 decades. He is both a tireless prison militant and an articulate and insightful writer. *Tear Down The Walls!* contains two inspiring and informative texts by John. In the autobiographical *Unbroken!* John shares his story with us; a tale of inhumanity and resistance to that inhumanity, and of a political awakening in the dark dungeons which the State prefers left unlit. In *Prison – A Crime Against Humanity* John explains, clearly and concisely, why prisons can never be ‘reformed’ and must be destroyed absolutely.

“When prisoners empower themselves through collective organisation and solidarity, they become the one force capable of truly frightening those who administer and enforce the prison system. That spirit of resistance is something that should inspire all of us.”



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when Woodhill claimed it would use “tough methods” to break the troublemakers. The reality was that selected “difficult” prisoners were ‘ghosted’ to the Woodhill unit, and then subjected to a regime of sensory deprivation and physical brutality. Many of the prisoners transferred to Woodhill had histories of mental illness and an inability to cope with mainstream prison life. Yet, at Woodhill, they were confined to empty concrete cells and denied even the most elemental of human contact, apart from beatings and ill-treatment. Some developed serious psychosis and some fought back, resulting in a dynamic of conflict developing that led to guards becoming almost murderous in their attempts to break the spirit of collective protest and resistance that prevailed at Woodhill. Eventually the tenacity and defiance of the prisoners overcame the violence and cruelty of the guards and sapped the will-power of the prison authorities to maintain the Woodhill regime in its then current form. Not one so-called prison reform organisation supported the Woodhill prisoners, and as usual it was prisoners themselves who exposed and fought back against the abuse being inflicted on them.

When prisoners empower themselves through collective organisation and solidarity, they become the one force capable of truly frightening those who administer and enforce the prison system. That spirit of resistance is something that should inspire all of us.



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## **Introduction**

**by Mark Barnsley**

Over the past 10 years or so, the British prison system has been able to claw back almost all of the concessions to humanity an earlier generation of prisoners fought tooth and nail to achieve. The State did not achieve this without resistance, and sometimes robust and significant resistance, such as the full-scale uprising at Full Sutton prison in 1997, but nonetheless it was accomplished. Resistance against tyranny is inevitable and will always endure, but certainly for the most part, throughout the British penal estate, a culture of selfish conformity has currently replaced one of solidarity and struggle.

When the wheels of repression were first set in motion, and the iron heel of the State began to be placed upon the throat of the British prison struggle, few prison ‘rebels’ had the insight and political consciousness to see what was ahead and realise just how far the system intended to go in their aim of crushing the prison struggle once and for all. It was easy to be a rebel when everyone was a rebel, but harder as the ‘divide and rule’ tactics of the State began to take their toll on solidarity by means of the ‘incentives and earned privileges scheme’. It was harder as the number of militants was reduced by naked brutality and the reintroduction of control units; when the landings of the prisons became flooded with smack; and when many one-time ‘rebels’ bailed out for an easy life on the ‘Enhanced’ wings while former comrades suffered in the blocks and units. Sometimes it is easy to be a rebel, but it is harder to be a revolutionary, and for the most part, only those with a genuine revolutionary political consciousness were able to remain true in the face of the dark winds of repression, and find the strength and courage to keep on fighting back. John Bowden is one of these.

I first met John on the exercise yard of Full Sutton maximum security prison in 1998 or 1999, and we quickly became close friends and comrades. John has a personal strength and integrity which shines like a beacon, and a deep level of intelligence and insight, qualities which have made him an accomplished prison organiser and militant, always at the forefront of resistance and struggle wherever the Prison Service ‘ghost-train’ has taken him. You always knew that John would back you up to the hilt, and that once you engaged with the enemy retreat was not an option!

Our first joint initiative was to try to get a proper campaign going to shut down the Woodhill torture unit, with a call for regular protests outside the jail and solidarity actions by prisoners. The ink was barely dry on our call to arms though when John was ghosted to Parkhurst, Britain’s ‘Alcatraz’ on the Isle of Wight. At least one protest outside Woodhill did materialise however, along with a solid prisoners work-strike at Full Sutton.

While John was in the block we corresponded regularly, and continued to swap ideas as well as the prison censor allowed. I was able to organise a number of other work-strikes, sit-outs, and protests at Full Sutton, a militant atmosphere reigned, and a full-scale uprising was only narrowly nipped in the bud. Then the TVs were brought in, and I was ghosted myself!

A few days after arriving on the wing at Long Lartin, I was astonished to see John, we couldn't believe they'd been stupid enough to put us on the same wing! The plotting began anew! It didn't last long though, within a few weeks we were caught up in a quite extraordinary situation, which was to see both of us ghosted, and me in the block for the rest of the year. Clearly wanting rid of us, a situation was engendered where we were locked in a cell, together with 4 others, and then accused of barricading it! Despite the fact that we could go nowhere, the whole wing was locked up and moved to another location, all staff leave was cancelled, and extra screws were brought in from other jails along with the police. Nine hours after the six of us had been locked in the 2 metre x 2 metre cell, screws in full riot gear came in with a water-cannon, and they and their dozens of colleagues beat us all the way to the block. As I was collapsing into unconsciousness on the floor of the anti-protest cell into which I'd been thrown, I could hear John being brought down shouting, "Is that the best you can do you cowards, can't you hit me any harder than that?!"

Nearly a year later, when I was briefly out of segregation, John was put on my wing at Frankland prison near Durham. However, we barely had chance to shake hands when the screws rushed on to say that there'd been a mistake and that he was on the wrong wing. They were so desperate to accommodate him elsewhere, they put John on the 'Enhanced' wing! A few days later I was back down the block accused of "fermenting unrest" (sic.) and off to Wakefield!

Even when we were in different nicks though, John proved a valuable comrade and ally, and we were able to jointly organise other initiatives such as solidarity actions in support of the Turkish hunger-strikers and prisoners in the Spanish FIES isolation units. Wherever John was I always knew that he would be constantly working against the system in whatever way he could!

There is no doubt that John is a man of action, a soldier, someone who will physically stand his ground and walk the walk as well as talk the talk. But, he is also a hugely articulate writer who expresses his political ideas clearly and cogently, and is never afraid to speak his mind irrespective of the personal consequences. And John certainly has been punished for speaking out, in ways that many who have never known the tyranny of prison life may find hard to believe possible. Believe it, for there are no depths to the barbarity and

In modern prisons this attitude towards prisoners is not just confined to the uniformed badly educated guards; it contaminates the mentality of all those who work for the prison system.

The systematic brutalization and torture of prisoners held in the punishment unit at Wormwood Scrubs prison during the 1990's could not have continued for such a sustained period without the collusion of all levels of staff employed at the prison. A subsequent official report, into what amounted to a nine year reign of terror at Wormwood Scrubs, admitted that managers at the jail colluded in the abuse and covered-up for the more than 160 guards involved. Doctors, social-workers, and chaplains at The Scrubs also kept their mouths shut and silently colluded in what was being done to prisoners. All shared a view that when dealing with prisoners no methods were morally unacceptable because prisoners were unworthy of human rights and undeserving of basic human consideration.



And therein lays exactly why prisons are unreformable and intrinsically barbaric. They de-humanize prisoner and guard alike, and set in steel and concrete that massively unequal relationship of power that inevitably creates dehumanization and abuse.

Despite what liberal prison reformists claim, the prison system is beyond reform and "improvement" and motivated solely by an intention to contain, control, and crush those confined within it. In fact, the cause of liberal prison reform has achieved nothing in terms of making prison less repressive and destructive of prisoners, If anything, those who pursue such a cause have aided and abetted the development of even more psychologically damaging regimes and greater overall control of prisoners. They've also assisted the state in making prisons more socially acceptable and legitimate.

Not one leading organization, such as the Prison Reform Trust and The Howard League for Penal Reform, publicly criticized the setting up in 1997 of the Woodhill "Close Supervision Centre", a vicious control unit that was compelled to moderate its regime only after repeated legal actions on behalf of prisoners held there and the passing of the 1998 Human Rights Act. The fact is that the middle-class prison reformists shared the state's view that a small minority of "troublemakers" and "subversives" made life difficult for everyone in prison and hindered the prison system in making jails more liberal and pleasant. And so, privately, nodded assent

semblance of personal power and autonomy, even one's basic bodily integrity is severely compromised and violated. "Adjustment", or conformity, one is warned is vital to survival and one is expected to exist as a feelingless, mindless automaton, just like the guards. Some prisoners refuse to make that adjustment and Camus' revolutionary laden word 'NO' then takes on a profound truth. When prisoners resist the dehumanising process of prison, when they defiantly defend their basic human integrity and dignity, when they express rage at the humiliation and degradation heaped upon them by malevolent guards and a system loaded solidly against them, when they fight back; then a deadly dynamic of struggle is born that provokes often murderous repression from their captors and a certain heroism from the prisoner.

After the Attica prison uprising in 1971 was savagely put down and suppressed an Attica guard said: "Had we lost Attica then we'd have to fight in the streets." He instinctively understood that the struggle of poor blacks, especially in the US ghettos was the same struggle waged by the Attica prisoners, the same struggle and fight against poverty, racism, powerlessness, and oppression. When prisoners revolt it is the revolt of the poor and oppressed everywhere. One struggle, one fight.

Real and genuine support for the struggle of prisoners must presuppose an understanding and belief that prisons must be abolished completely. Calls for superficial reforms of such an intrinsically brutal and inhuman institution are both naïve and tantamount to a belief that prisons are justified and ultimately legitimate. In order to truly believe in the political importance of the prison struggle one must recognise the real nature of prisons and how the state employs them as instruments of repression and terror against poor people almost exclusively. As weapons of class conflict they must be abolished and done away with completely. There can be no compromise on this issue. Where one stands in relation to it ultimately determines one's true position in the struggle against the ruling class and its state.

When crushing prison uprisings and attempting to destroy prisoner activists, the prison system justifies its actions by demonizing prisoners and portraying them as 'The Other', something other than human; folk devils without any redeeming human qualities or basic humanity. This stigmatization serves a deliberate purpose, to manufacture public consent and approval for whatever methods are considered necessary to keep prisoners down.

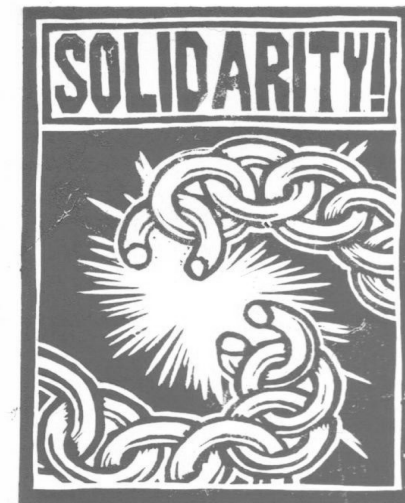
Prison guards themselves feel able to absolve their behaviour towards prisoners by viewing them as something less than human, as feelingless objects devoid of morality and any human virtue. This de-humanization of prisoners by their guards, although convenient to salve the conscience and avoid feelings of guilt, actually de-humanizes the guards too. The behaviour of the guards in the Nazi concentration camps was the inevitable result of this process of de-humanizing prisoners and relating to them as objects devoid of thought, feeling, and human worth.

inhumanity of the system and its turn-key lackeys. And believe this too: John Bowden has never been intimidated by the grinding brutality he has suffered, the long years of isolation have never caused him to surrender. He remains defiant, unvanquished, unbowed, every inch the human-being that the cowards who have beaten him and kept him chained can never aspire to be.

Leeds ABC are honoured to be able to publish this pamphlet. In *Unbroken!* John shares his story with us; a tale of inhumanity and resistance to that inhumanity, of a political awakening in the dark dungeons which the State prefers left unlit, and above all of solidarity and the struggle to maintain personal integrity in the face of the most terrible adversity. In *Prison – A Crime Against Humanity* John shows, clearly and concisely, why prisons can never be 'reformed' and must be destroyed absolutely.

Insights into the closed prison world of blocks and control units are rare, and in writing about this world for us, John Bowden is once again risking more than many would care to sacrifice themselves. All we can do is offer him our solidarity. Tear down the walls!

Mark Barnsley  
Leeds ABC  
February 2007



## Unbroken!

I suppose I am what the Americans term a “state-raised convict”, having spent virtually the whole of my life incarcerated in various forms of penal institutions. My early formative years were largely spent imprisoned in youth custody institutions, borstals, reform schools, and other types of childrens’ prisons; most of my adult life has been spent in maximum-security prisons. I’ve spent the last 25 consecutive years imprisoned as a life sentence prisoner, and I remain imprisoned today. Amazingly maybe, despite a life spent confined within total institutions, I remain uninstitutionalised and my life in prison has always been characterised by rebellion, resistance, and an implacable determination to fight back. My spirit of resistance has never been broken. Despite never having known freedom I have fought and striven for it, sometimes to the point of death, in prison.

My early childhood and some of my teenage years were spent in the tough, working-class districts of South London, and from my earliest age I was extremely streetwise and independent of spirit. I had little formal schooling, although possessed of lots of natural intelligence and a sharp inquisitive mind, coupled with a somewhat wild and reckless sense of adventure. It was maybe inevitable that I would develop into a “delinquent” boy who ran wild with like-spirited urchins around the streets of Pechkam and Bermondsey. I was captured, criminalised, and fed into the criminal justice system at about 11 years old. Until I was 15, and incarcerated more permanently I engaged in a veritable war with the police as they chased and pursued me when I ran away from children’s homes and reform schools and hid out in South London. My parents home was regularly raided by the police and my father was once charged with “Harbouring a known criminal” after I was discovered sleeping on his sofa. I was 13 years old.

My early offences were petty and insignificant – theft, housebreaking, stealing from shops, etc though as a determined and persistent runaway from state institutions the police devoted a disproportionate amount of manpower, time, and brutality in tracking me down and returning me to “lawful custody”. In the process I developed a deep and abiding fear and hatred of them, and in time an irrevocable feeling of alienation from the entire system. In a basic, instinctive way this was the genesis of my politicization. Children traumatised and brutalised within state institutions are often damaged for life, and many of them later fill maximum-security prisons for having vented their rage and pain on society generally. I was one of those.

In November of 1980 I was arrested along with two other men for the murder of a man who had been drinking in our company in a South London flat. It was a senseless, almost gratuitous killing, and reflected the extent of my brutalisation

status of the prisoner is remarkably similar to that of the completely disempowered slave. They can be brutalised and even murdered by their captors and the state will always sanction it and provide cover for it.

But prisoners have fought back. Just as the official history of African slavery and resistance to it either ignores or reduces to footnotes the struggle of the slaves themselves to win their freedom, (Wilberforce and his white liberal supporters are the historical champions of the anti-slavery movement, while the slave rebellions in the Caribbean are passed over and virtually ignored), so the struggle of modern prisoners goes unrecognised by the professional prison reform lobby.

The struggle of prisoners has nevertheless been a potent force and often produced confrontations with the state of a revolutionary character – Attica, Strangeways, Sante Fe, etc. The prison struggle, in the US especially, also created amongst prisoners iconic black revolutionary figures like George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, H. Rap Brown, etc. In whatever sphere and context, the more intense and desperate the struggle against oppression, the more courageous and committed are those who resist and fight it. Prisoners radicalised by the experience of repression very often closely identify with revolutionary movements in the Third World because they feel an affinity with those resisting the undisguised viciousness of the state stripped of its liberal democratic veneer. They also understand, having glimpsed the true nature of the beast, that palliative reforms of the system essentially change nothing. To actively fight the system in prison requires the sort of strength and commitment similar to that shown by freedom fighters of the Third World; beatings, torture, and death are often the consequences of both struggles.

Because the prison system is wielded as a weapon essentially against the poorest and most marginalised in our deeply class-divided society, the issue of prison is a class issue, and should be analysed and understood in the context of class politics. Prison is fundamentally a working class experience, just as the Victorian workhouses and asylums were. It was by deliberate intention and design that most jails were built and situated in socially deprived and always potentially rebellious working class districts – Apart from anything else they represented symbolic warnings of the powers of the state to those who refused to stay in line and know their place. Prisons continue to blight the lives of the poor. In the US more young working class blacks are incarcerated than attend institutions of higher education, and in Britain arrest and imprisonment of poor black and Asian men is disproportionately high, as is the frequency with which they are found dead in suspicious circumstances in police and prison custody. It is always the poor, the disadvantaged, and the victimised who fill the jails in our society. Their struggle where and when it exists in defence of their rights is a politically legitimate one and should be recognised as such.

When people are imprisoned they are forced to make some fundamental psychological adjustments. The most shattering is the total removal of any

## Prison - A Crime Against Humanity

Prison is a modern form of slavery, and whatever its ideological justification and whoever it ultimately serves and represents, it is essentially a crime against humanity.

Prisons are intrinsically brutal places designed and intended to systematically brutalise and render completely powerless those held captive. More specifically, it is the spirit and humanity of the poorest and most disadvantaged in society that prison seeks to destroy.

Prisons, despite what their supporters and defenders claim, have never truly prevented crime or protected the ordinary general public. If there does exist a relationship between prison and crime it is an inverse one. Prisons produce angry, de-socialised individuals who are more likely to break the laws of a society they feel alienated from and resentful of.

Because the essence of our laws are framed and administered around the laws of private property, imprisonment is an almost exclusively working class experience. It never touches the lives of the privileged or the corporate gangsters and crooks who plunder and murder on a global scale. Only the poor and powerless go to jail in our society, where they are disciplined, punished and taught to know their place.

Prison society is very much a microcosm of our wider class divided society, and as such reflects its worst authoritarianism and anti-working class tendencies. Poor blacks are treated worst of all in prison and the vicious racism of the guards compounds all that black prisoners suffer at the hands of an institutionally racist police and judicial system.



There is also a class struggle within prison and along with it an undisguised cruel relationship of power between guards and prisoners that allows those wearing the uniform to do whatever they deem necessary to break the resistance and defiance of those held captive. In terms of their relationship to the state, the legal and civil

after years of brutalising treatment in state institutions. I was sentenced to life imprisonment with the judge's recommendation that I serve no less than 25 years. Realistically, nobody expected me to ever emerge from jail, and I entered the prison system with absolutely nothing to lose or live for. Quite soon after my imprisonment however, I began to become politicized; to emerge from the hopelessness, violence, and rage that had characterised my life thus far. Ironically, prison provided me with the time and opportunity to read, study, and think; and recognise a common interest and humanity with my fellow captives. I'd always possessed a certain degree of class consciousness, always identified with and felt part of a poor underclass. I'd always felt an instinctive hatred of the rich and powerful, and believed in a vague concept of class struggle and revolution. In prison for life, I was now able to intellectually develop and grow, and in a strange sort of way, discover a freedom of heart and mind that I'd never before known. Within two years of my imprisonment for life I had metamorphosed into a committed revolutionary dedicated to fighting the prison system, making whatever contribution I was able to the wider struggle beyond prison.

Initially my fight against the prison system was extreme and direct. It reflected a personal belief that I would probably die in prison anyway, so had absolutely nothing to lose by creating situations that would provoke the system into a murderous response. As I saw, witnessed, and experienced it, the prison system was terrorizing prisoners and imposing regimes designed to destroy us. I decided to terrorise it back and engage in actions that would unnerve and demoralise those employed to administer prison repression. In January 1983 at Parkhurst maximum-security prison I took an assistant governor hostage and held him captive in his office for almost two days. Armed police laid siege to the prison and my access to a phone resulted in the close interest and involvement of the media in what was going on. Eventually my demand that my legal representatives and a journalist of my choice be allowed access to the prison to hear and record my complaints against the prison system was conceded and I released the governor unharmed.

I was charged with hostage taking and given an additional ten years, and then buried in solitary confinement for four consecutive years. During those four years the prison system made a serious and determined attempt to physically and psychologically destroy me and pushed me to the very edge of human endurance. Apart from being held in almost clinical isolation in brutal and austere punishment/segregation units, I was also moved around every 28 days or so between jails in an attempt to keep me constantly disorientated and unable to settle. This was intended to keep me in a permanent state of stress and grind me down mentally. I was also subjected to frequent physical assaults and beatings, and made to feel at the complete mercy of my guards. Far from destroying me,

however, I was made immeasurably stronger and more resilient by what was being inflicted on me and I came to feel like a soldier in battle, capable of enormous endurance and psychological resourcefulness. The harder they tried to demoralise and dispirit me the greater became my will to survive and somehow fight back. I also read voraciously throughout my time in solitary, and grew intellectually. In mind, body and spirit I was being tempered by struggle and deepened in my commitment to fighting the system.

Occasionally I was moved to punishment units where I was housed alongside other “unmanageable” prisoners, men who like me were being held in permanent segregation and moved constantly around the prison system on the “ghost-train”. I formed deep bonds of solidarity and comradeship with this relatively small group of men. Whenever we fortuitously found ourselves grouped together in one place we would inevitably organize to change the balance of power between ourselves and the guards trying to control and subdue us. Protests and “tear-ups” were common and often spectacular, and we used every means at our extremely limited disposal (including our own body waste on occasion) to fight back and render the regimes they were attempting to inflict upon us inoperable. Occasionally we succeeded and so were quickly dispersed again around the system. Quite literally we were at war with the system, and prison administrators tried constantly to prevent our influence and example “contaminating” prisoners in the mainstream of the long-term prison system.

My experiences in those years shaped me into an effective organiser, and when I did eventually return to mainstream prison life, in around 1987, I set out to change more generally the relationship of power between prisoners and the system. I knew and understood that prisons were allowed to function with the consent and cooperation of prisoners, that the power of the guards was essentially based on prisoners recognising and accepting that power held over them. I believed that should prisoners withdraw that recognition and cooperation en masse then that entrenched relationship of power that maintained the oppression of prisoners would be seriously undermined, weakened, and possibly destroyed. The organisation of prisoners was the key.

Throughout the late 1980’s and early 90’s I helped organise and participated in countless work strikes, sit-down protests, mass refusals of food, and other actions based on the collective organisation of prisoners. I also attempted to set up prisoner representative councils and unions backed by the collective support and strength of large groups of prisoners. At Long Lartin prison, during the late 80’s, I organised a series of public debates and forums on prisoners’ rights, some of which were shown on national TV. My motive the whole time was to create collective prisoner empowerment and to weaken the authority of the prison system to such an extent that its primary purpose - the repression of prisoners - was seriously compromised and undermined.

the stronger I subsequently became. I could so completely identify with Ho Chi Minh’s beautiful poem:

*Without the cold and desolation of winter,  
There could not be the warmth and splendour of spring,  
Hardship has tempered me,  
And turned my mind to steel.*

Ironically, if I hadn’t chosen to fight back in jail, and suffer the consequences, I doubt that I would have survived. Had I conformed and submitted in the vain hope that such “model prisoner” behaviour would be rewarded with a reasonably early release, I’d have withered and died as a proud human being and lost the essence of my humanity. To submit to repression is to die - to die mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and in every way that defines us as real human beings. I would not surrender my humanity to them because I couldn’t, I wasn’t made that way, my spirit had been shaped by proud Celtic parents and nourished by a hard struggle to survive, first the racism and poverty of my childhood (in those days the Irish in South London were the hard target of exploitation and violence), and then the abuse and brutality of state institutions. Fighting for my dignity and rights in prison strengthened me in a way that nothing else could. It sustained and even enriched my character to the point where I was utterly changed for the better as a human-being. I would sooner die here with my dignity, self-respect, and belief system intact, than skulk out of here broken and tugging my forelock to the system, terrified of my own shadow and devoid of hope.

I am finally eligible for parole this year (2007), having served the full term recommended by the trial judge, although it’s unlikely that the parole board will agree to my release. In all the pre-parole hearing interviews and reports my politics and contact with political activists on the outside has been highlighted as a “risk factor” and an argument for keeping me imprisoned. I’m sure the system was hopeful that I would not survive my term of life imprisonment, and indeed inflicted such treatment on me over the years that survival was unlikely. I’m sure too that it’s intention now is to prevent my release for as long as possible; Few lifers are released unbroken or at least severely diminished in terms of their ability to ever again defy the system. In fact, I represent no risk or danger to the outside community whatsoever, and the system is aware of that and has acknowledged it in various reports from psychologists, social-workers, and prison professionals - The real “danger” that I now represent is a political attitude and intention towards the prison system that can’t be allowed to go unpunished. For having stood up to and resisted unlawful and inhuman treatment in prison, and retained some basic human integrity and humanity in the process, I probably shall now remain imprisoned far beyond what even a reactionary judge deemed an appropriate period of time all those years ago. Hell will freeze over, however, before I surrender that part of myself that had the courage and integrity to fight back and resist when resistance often seemed futile.



The only sure tactic of victory when prisoners resist and fight back is solidarity. They collectively possess the potential to cripple prisons and bring to a halt their operation as places of dehumanization and pain. Over the years I've witnessed the potential power of prisoners when they stand up and say "Enough!" I've seen the guards melt away and seek out exits when large groups of disgruntled and vengeful prisoners form and refuse to disperse, to back down. But solidarity has to be organised and coordinated if it isn't to be destroyed by the first rush of the riot squads or the complete lockdown of prisoners. A solidarity has to be built that is politically conscious and will remain intact even in the face of the most severe repression. Outside support can be critical in this context. Prisoner support activists should establish contact with those prisoners fighting back and seek to provide political recognition, support, and influence, and all the time let the system know that its treatment of rebellious prisoners is being observed and that sources of active solidarity exist on the outside.

During the 1970's the prisoners support group PROP (Preservation of the Rights Of Prisoners) successfully coordinated with prisoners inside the jails, a whole series of high profile demonstrations that put the fear of god into the Home Office, shifting the balance of institutional power to the advantage of long-term prisoners throughout much of the 1970's and 80's. During the 80's and early 90's the Revolutionary Communist Group established contact with many prisoners engaged in struggle. They helped politicize that struggle by recognising its political legitimacy and encouraging prisoners to do likewise. They also managed to get their newspaper *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* widely circulated in prisons, and included a "Prisoners Fightback" page in it that spread the word of struggle around the system and helped link up activity and activists around the jails. If the commitment and enthusiasm exists then solidarity and struggle can be built even in conditions of adversity and great difficulty. I have personally witnessed that many times.

I was 24 years old when I entered prison for life; I am now 50. Despite the long, horrendous years and decades of oppression, conflict, and sometimes extreme suffering, prison has never defeated me or robbed me of my dignity, personal integrity, or feeling of self-worth. Possibly I just happened to be more resilient than all of the friends I lost to death and insanity over the years, or was fortunate to discover a political cause that sustained and motivated me during even the very worst times, when I was driven to the very edge of existence. I think that discovering a common humanity with people in prison, and in the process coming to recognise my own humanity, finally, was an enormous source of strength to me. The knowledge that I was part of a common struggle, that was essentially right and just, always gave me that added strength to hold on and keep fighting. Repression didn't weaken me. The beatings, solitary confinement, overwhelming use of force and brutality against me, did not put a scratch on my spirit or cause me to doubt my vision of the possibility of radical change. In fact, the more cruel and brutal their treatment of me,

Because I was identified as a prison militant and a threat to the "good order and discipline" of the institution I was frequently targeted and either segregated or transferred around the system. Sometimes I would be beaten up by guards who were enraged and frustrated by my ability and willingness to mobilise prisoners. They imagined that teaching me a physically painful lesson in who's in charge might cure me of my defiance. It only deepened my contempt for them and increased my determination to attack the whole basis of that power. Early on in my struggle to organise prisoners I made contact with political support groups on the outside. I wrote regular articles on the prison struggle for their newspapers and tried constantly to encourage them to support and recognise that struggle as a legitimate campaign for human rights and as an authentic revolutionary frontline against state repression. For me, the whole context of the prison struggle was political and revolutionary, and I felt that as prisoners we shared a common interest with all these peoples and groups around the world struggling for freedom and justice.

In 1992 I was able to make a fairly dramatic escape from prison and remained on the run for two years. Predictably, the system reacted with rage to the manner in which I slipped almost effortlessly away to freedom. The governor of Maidstone prison, from where I departed, later remarked with some bitterness, to a newspaper: "Bowden had been allowed, under escort, to visit a family member as part of his process towards rehabilitation, and this is how he chose to repay us. He probably thinks that he has beaten the system, but he will have to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder."

The newspapers that reported my escape doubted that I would survive long on the run considering how institutionalised I must be and devoid of friends and contacts on the outside. In fact, my long years of imprisonment had equipped me remarkably well to survive for a protracted period on the run. Far from destroying me, prison had profoundly strengthened me; the experience of extreme hardship and adversity had deepened and tempered my character, and increased my resourcefulness immeasurably. It had also provided me with valuable contacts, and therefore the means to survive indefinitely as a fugitive. The bonds of solidarity and mutual support that I had developed in prison when fighting and campaigning for prisoners' rights were translated into an extremely efficient and loyal network of support and assistance after I had escaped.

My first month of freedom was like a time of re-birth. For so many years I had been entombed in the colourless and sterile world of maximum-security prisons, denied any human experience and stimulation beyond that generated by conflict and confrontation with my jailers, my physical and mental horizons often reduced to the dimensions of a solitary confinement cell. Suddenly I was completely free, alive and sensitised to a world infused with colour, activity, sensation, and meaning.

To survive as a fugitive one necessarily has to adopt the guerrilla mentality, merging and blending with one's social terrain, while retaining a deep and irreversible sense of one's difference and separateness, one's constant vulnerability and dependence on the support and assistance of others. For 2 years I lived as the hunted Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe; the runaway slave in the city of the slaveholder; the resistance fighter behind enemy lines. I lived with and amongst people, but was never truly of their world, although an absolutely indispensable ingredient of my avoiding recapture was the help and assistance given to me by others.

Recapture, when it happened, was an experience akin to death, a terrible and unbearable extinguishment of existence as defined by the contours of free will and movement, of loving personal relationships, and the experience of bodily integrity and independence. I was, once again, the exclusive property of the state, to do with as it pleased. And as if in acknowledgement of my unbroken spirit and a desire for revenge, it "re-classified" me as an "Extreme Escape Risk" and reburied me for life.

I was recaptured in Scotland where I was held in Perth maximum-security prison for two years. Despite my attempts to avoid being transferred back to the English prison system, where I knew the possibility of ever being released was unlikely, I was singled out as a "ringleader" during a mass work strike at Perth in 1994. I was transferred back to England and immediately placed on the "Ghost-train". For the next nine years I fought and struggled constantly to be returned to Scotland and close to the woman I married there soon after my recapture. Eventually, the system conceded, and with some reluctance, transferred me back across the border in 2004.

As with any struggle, my involvement in the struggle for prisoners' rights over the last 25 years has had its high and low points, its moments of sweet victory when the solidarity and collective strength of prisoners prevailed, and its moments when the system momentarily gained absolute control and the sense of defeat ate into my soul. But I had witnessed sufficient victories, sometimes against impossible odds, to sustain me through the bad times, and my absolute faith and belief in the ability and collective strength of prisoners to fundamentally shake the system remained unbreakable. I don't know if I can point to any significant reforms of the prison system achieved by the struggle I engaged in, and many of the victories I witnessed have now with time been reversed, but maybe that wasn't the point of my struggle. I never ever believed that prisons could ever be "improved" or made better. It was never my desire to pursue superficial reform of the system or a slight alleviation in the inhuman conditions prisoners are subjected to. I believed in something far more radical and utterly transforming, something defined not by small, insignificant changes, but by a much wider struggle for the total eradication of prisons. My intention the whole time was to make regimes unmanageable, to help create a "crisis of control" by organising prisoners to collectively empower themselves to the extent where the fundamental purpose of prison was seriously undermined. It was a revolutionary struggle not measured by small improvements in prison conditions, but

by perpetual conflict and confrontation and a war for control of the prison.

Over the last, say, ten years there has been a significant downturn in the struggle of prisoners, and the system has more or less established total control over them. Ever since the uprising at Strangeways prison in 1990 the state has pursued a long-term strategy in "taking prison regimes back", especially in the long-term prisons where prisoner solidarity was strongest. It has used a number of tactics to achieve this; the isolation of activists in control units and segregation units, the separation of prisoners into smaller, more manageable units and groups; the bribing of prisoners with "enhanced regimes" as a reward for conformist behaviour, and the creation of Pavlovian regimes aided and abetted by psychologists and social workers. In a little over ten years the system has managed to change the culture in prisons from one of resistance to one of compliance and acquiescence. In many ways what has happened in prisons over the last decade or so mirrors what has been happening in society generally. Just as the state on the outside has gone on the offensive and rapidly laid the foundations of a police state beneath the guise of "the war on terrorism", so in the prisons the same state has pursued a war against the human rights of prisoners, especially those who attempt to resist and fight back.

The recreation of control units in the prison system during the 90's, 20 years after public opinion and legal action forced the closure of the notorious Wakefield control unit, indicated that prisoner activists would now be treated without any regard whatsoever for their human rights. In the words of home secretary Michael Howard at the time: "Prison troublemakers will be shown that it doesn't pay to cause trouble." The purpose of the control unit is two-fold - to isolate the militant and reduce their sphere of influence and source of support, and then actively work on breaking the mind and spirit of the militant. I have personally experienced control unit regimes and know that the struggle within them is a daily war of survival where one is taken to the very edge of existence. In the Woodhill control unit in the late 90's, prisoners held in bare concrete cells, and denied even a semblance of human contact fought back. They created a dynamic of conflict with the guards and administration that inexorably drove the regime into the ground, and forced the Prison Service to partly abandon it. After Woodhill the system was reluctant to again concentrate activists and militants in purpose-built, identifiable control units. Instead, it began to segregate such prisoners indefinitely within ordinary long-term prison punishment blocks or "Basic regime" wings, and simply hold them there for years. The regimes of these punishment blocks altered accordingly. Physical beatings and brutal treatment became commonplace and an integral part of what was being done to the prisoners held there. Unfortunately, the system was allowed to create two levels of existence within the prison system; one occupied by conforming prisoners compelled and blackmailed into sharing the institutional interests of the guards, and one occupied by "difficult" prisoners who are confined to a veritable hell of brutality, isolation, and pain. But struggle is still possible, and while oppression exists, so too does resistance to it.