

The worst prison system in Western Europe

By Edward Ellis

THERE ARE around 50,000 people in British prisons. Around one fifth of these were convicted of crimes involving violence. Of the rest, in 1993, 22,754 were gaoled because they didn't pay fines or taxes (504 for non-payment of the poll tax); about 600 were detainees awaiting deportation decisions.

50% of the prison population is under 25. 16% of the male prison population, and 26% of the females are black — although black people only account for 5% of the population as a whole. About half of all prisoners have literacy problems.

60% of the remand prisoners — that is, people awaiting trial who have been refused bail — are released after trial, either because they are found not guilty or because they have spent so long on remand that they have already served their sentence. They get no compensation, although they could have lost their job, home and family, and no legal aid if they sue for wrongful arrest.

From 1990 to 1994 there were over 200 reported suicides in prisons, and over 3,000 cases of self-harm (attempted suicide).

The Woolf Report, commissioned after the Strangeways riot in 1990, supplemented by many reports by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Judge Tumim, on

individual prisons, found conditions to be unacceptable. The Woolf report advocated many reforms in the system.

One of them sums up conditions in many prisons: an end to "slopping out". Many prisons were built in the early nineteenth century and have no toilets in individual cells (47% in 1990; down to 11% by 1994 according to official figures).

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In many prisons, inmates are "banged up" most of the time (sometimes for 23 hours a day most days of the week).

There is a huge problem of drug abuse. According to government figures, half of

all prisoners take illegal drugs of some sort. Judge Tumim's report on Stryal women's prison this year concluded that 80% of prisoners were taking drugs such as heroin.

Many people are introduced to drugs in prison. New programmes of "drug-free wings" are being introduced, which may have some positive effects, although they threaten to condemn certain parts of prisons into being "dumping grounds" for drug abusers. According to the Prisoners' Resource Service, drug-free wings are most help to "new" drug users; serious addicts do not respond well to them. "We are worried that the proposed emphasis on detection and punishment for drug use will make it harder for our clients to present themselves to prison staff or outside agencies such as ourselves for help." (Prison Report Summer 1995).

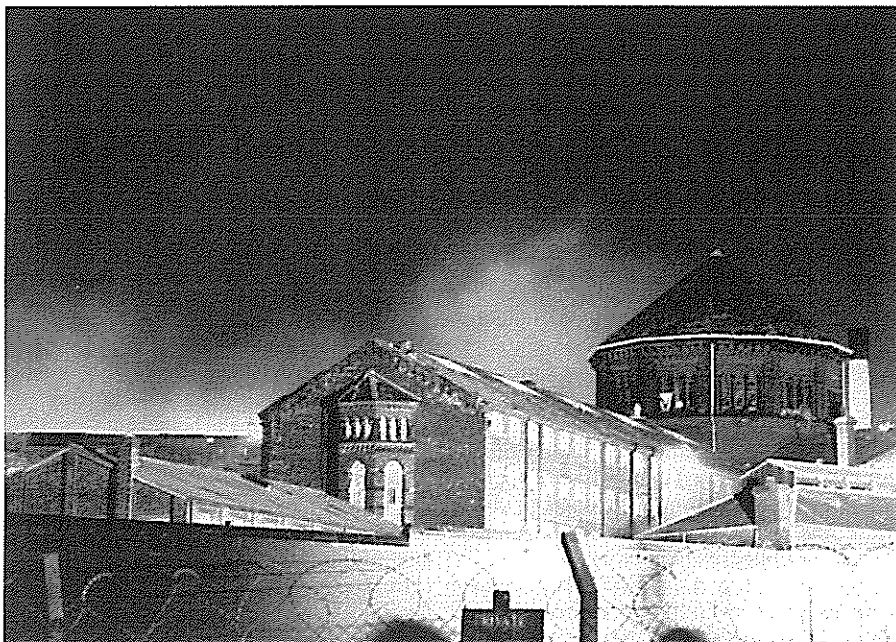
Most professionals like probation officers believe that non-custodial sentences are more effective in reducing rates of re-offending than prison. They are also cheaper: it costs around £500 per week to keep each person in prison. That's 26,000 per year, per prisoner.

The liberal recommendations of the Woolf Report sit badly with Tory ideology on prison, however, which stress the need to punish criminals by imprisoning them, and the need to make prison regimes harsher (a policy fuelled by absurd alarmist reports in the press which stress how easy life is in prisons: these tend to be reports about "open prisons" where the regimes are more relaxed). New prisons are being built. And in the meantime, prison populations are growing.

Crowded prisons have even worse problems of violence and drug abuse.

At the same time, the government has carried through an offensive against the Prison Officers Association — with changes in work practices, taking away their right to strike, and through privatisation. In fact the POA have often been the most resistant to reform, and the union is known for its racism (or the racism of many of its members); in the 1970s there were widespread reports about fascist activity. But their members' standard of living has suffered as much from this offensive as their ability to "control" the day-to-day running of prisons.

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Strangeways prison

example, Germany, the Netherlands or Italy. British prisons (except for D Category prisons, known as "open prisons" which are for prisoners who have committed less serious crimes or are near the end of their sentences) rarely have facilities for cooking, for example — and mass-cooked prison food is notoriously awful.

Public debate on the criminal justice system hinges around the issues of per-

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sonal responsibility for crime and the social causes of crime. The broad liberal left stress the importance of social factors in explaining crime, while the government demand stiffer sentences to deal with individuals. The Labour Party stress both — with Tony Blair's famous call to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime."

What is the socialist answer?

Prisons are part of the state, the "armed bodies of men" whose primary purpose is repression. They grew up with the capitalist system. Before capitalism, some societies did not "punish" anti-social behaviour in the modern sense. Others defined "criminal" behaviour as a form of madness.

Public executions were normal until well into the nineteenth century — the last one in Britain was in 1868. Prisons arose as a new form of control. They were designed as a form of punishment, rather than simply a way to separate dangerous people from the rest of society, and often carried on the most barbaric practices. Prisoners were forced on "treadmills": huge wheels turned by prisoners walking in them; whoever stopped walking could suffer broken legs as a result of the movement of the machine. Even the violence and brutalisation of prisons today pale in comparison with the prisons of a few decades ago (not to mention prisons outside Europe: a recent report showed that prisoners in Rwanda were literally unable to sit down because conditions were so overcrowded, and people were dying from gangrene as a result of being forced to stand in wet conditions 24 hours a day.)

These days, prisons define their role as to rehabilitate, rather than simply to punish. In practice, there has not been a clear transition from "punishment" to "rehabilitation" and there is in effect a struggle between those who want to push the rehabilitative philosophy further, and those who want to turn the clock back. "Rehabilitation" is itself a questionable term, implying a rather medical approach.

Prison isn't stopping crime, it is merely criminalising large layers of the population, especially among youth. In the United States, the majority of black youth can now expect to spend some time behind bars. Poverty is obviously responsible for large amounts of crime. Sheer boredom adds to the problem, especially among youth: there can be little doubt that the rise in crimes like "joy riding" in recent years is because working-class youth have nothing more interesting to do.

The Tories blame all these problems on single parents, the lack of responsible male role models for kids, and so on. John Redwood's recent outburst against unmarried mothers is linked, if not openly, to the Tory agenda on "law and order". It's an almost unbelievably simplistic analysis. Whilst it is certainly true that the rise in petty crime in inner cities (there is strong evidence to suggest that the rise in violent crimes is to a considerable extent exaggerated in the popular imagination) reflects a serious collapse of the social fabric, "lone parenthood" is hardly the cause of it. Indeed, since violent behaviour is clearly linked to a violent upbringing, it might well be the case that young people are better off not having a violent male role model around the house.

Reducing crime must mean improving conditions in inner cities and elsewhere. The Tory emphasis on punishment will not reduce crime: it will just embitter whole sections of the population. Furthermore, it is quite true that imprisonment can often "graduate" people from petty to serious crime: they learn "tricks of the trade" inside — certainly better than they learn whatever is provided by inadequate education services.

We can't simply call for an abolition of prisons. Some people are violent, and society needs to be protected from them. Others behave in an anti-social way, and socialists can't be indifferent to the suffering they cause.

We can't be in favour of punishment, at least in the sense of making life miserable for prisoners in addition to depriving them of their liberty. The more that can be done genuinely to "rehabilitate" those who can be rehabilitated — help them learn skills which will enable them to survive in the outside world (both technical skills and new ways of approaching their problems) — the better. The fewer people who can be imprisoned in the first place the better.

But often the fundamental problem is that offenders come from very "dislocated" social backgrounds. It is not only their family background (if they have families and were not brought up in institutions), which may have been violent and abusive. It is that the communities in which they live have disintegrated under the impact of economic recession and Tory neglect, and there has been collapse of social, community or collective solidarity.

Prisoners often do not have any class consciousness, even though most of them are from working-class (or at least poor) backgrounds.

The left liberal stress on "the causes of crime" — unemployment, bad housing, etc — is right. Dealing with these problems would hugely alleviate crime.

But it goes deeper. In many inner cities, since the mid-1980s there has been a huge increase in the drug trade. Working class youth with little education and no hope of making a living legitimately turn to dealing drugs. They can make vastly more money selling cocaine than they could in a normal job — if they could get a job at all. In this sense, the Tories are right that there is a decline in "moral values" behind crime. But it is a decline for which they are entirely responsible, rooted in commercial individualism which puts cash before people. Thatcher's celebrated claim that there is no such thing as society is exactly this point. "Thatcherism" helped erode notions of community, or of social solidarity. Nicking your neighbour's video is the end-product.

Capitalism, and especially dog-eat-dog eighties Thatcherite Toryism, defines success in purely material terms. If people can't "make it" through legal channels, they will make it through illegal ones.

Breaking through this problem — the atomisation of working class communities — means not only addressing problems like unemployment, but building a movement which is based on the concept of social — that is, working class — solidarity. A powerful socialist movement could offer an alternative to alienated working class youth, not only materially, but — in a sense — morally.

Socialists should be concerned about

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the misery crime makes of the lives of its victims. It is not enough to "explain" crimes — especially violent crime — by "social conditions". People do have responsibility for their actions. Often the trouble with consistent offenders is they have not learned to consider the consequences of what they do, either for themselves or from others.

That way we can aim for a society in which there is a whole new way of dealing with anti-social behaviour, in which social pressure alone would be enough to deal with potential criminals.

In the meantime, we should campaign for more liberal regimes, and for more use of non-custodial sentences, as well as fighting the social roots of crime. ■