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—*from the San Quentin Outlaw, suppressed by the prison Warden*

Using Racism at San Quentin

“I’ve been accused of being a simple man, and I think that’s true. I believe in a system of reward and punishment. This is no Boy Scout camp.”

—Louis S. Nelson, Warden of
California’s San Quentin prison

WHAT HAD BEGUN as a protest by Black Muslims against San Quentin’s prison conditions quickly veered out of control and developed into full-scale racial warfare. By mid-January, there had been sporadic outbreaks of violence, and two convicts, both white, had been stabbed to death by unknown assailants. Two days later, the whole prison was engulfed in chaos.

The biting smell of tear gas hung heavy in the air as small bands of inmates raged through the yards, breaking windows and pausing to attack stragglers of the opposite race. A series of fires erupted in the cellblocks, belching angry black smoke over the prison’s 400 acres. By late afternoon, more than half of San Quentin’s 4000 prisoners had converged on the main exercise yard. Armed with pipes, wooden clubs, daggers fashioned from scissor halves, forks twisted into brass knuckles and other bizarre weapons, they massed for a final showdown. 1500 whites, a few of them with hand-made iron crosses around their necks and clumsy swastikas tattooed on their arms, formed at one end of the yard; 1000 blacks stood at the other. As if acting out a ritual, they began to advance, throwing rocks and bricks, and protecting themselves with shields made from mess-hall trays.

There was less than 50 feet of daylight between the front ranks when the prison guards and police brought in from outlying cities finally began to act, laying down what one observer later called “a wall of fire” with shotguns and rifles. Although weapons were supposedly aimed at the ground, several convicts crumpled, hit either directly or by ricocheting slugs. Shouting and cursing at the guards and each other, the two armies hesitated for a moment, then broke and ran.

The January, 1967 riot was one of the most serious dis-

turbances in San Quentin’s 115-year history. One prison official later admitted that it was “a miracle” that only two men were killed. Countless more were injured, 18 of them seriously enough to require hospitalization. It took several hours after the convicts had finally been herded back to lock-up to collect the more than 1500 pounds of homemade weapons that lay scattered over the battlefield, and it was several days before the prison regimen returned to normal.

The local newspaper called it “a con war,” placing the story on the front page for a day and then letting it die. An aide from Governor Ronald Reagan’s office appeared on the scene at the height of the violence, looked around, and then left for Sacramento, assuring reporters, “People here at San Quentin know their job. They acted decisively.”

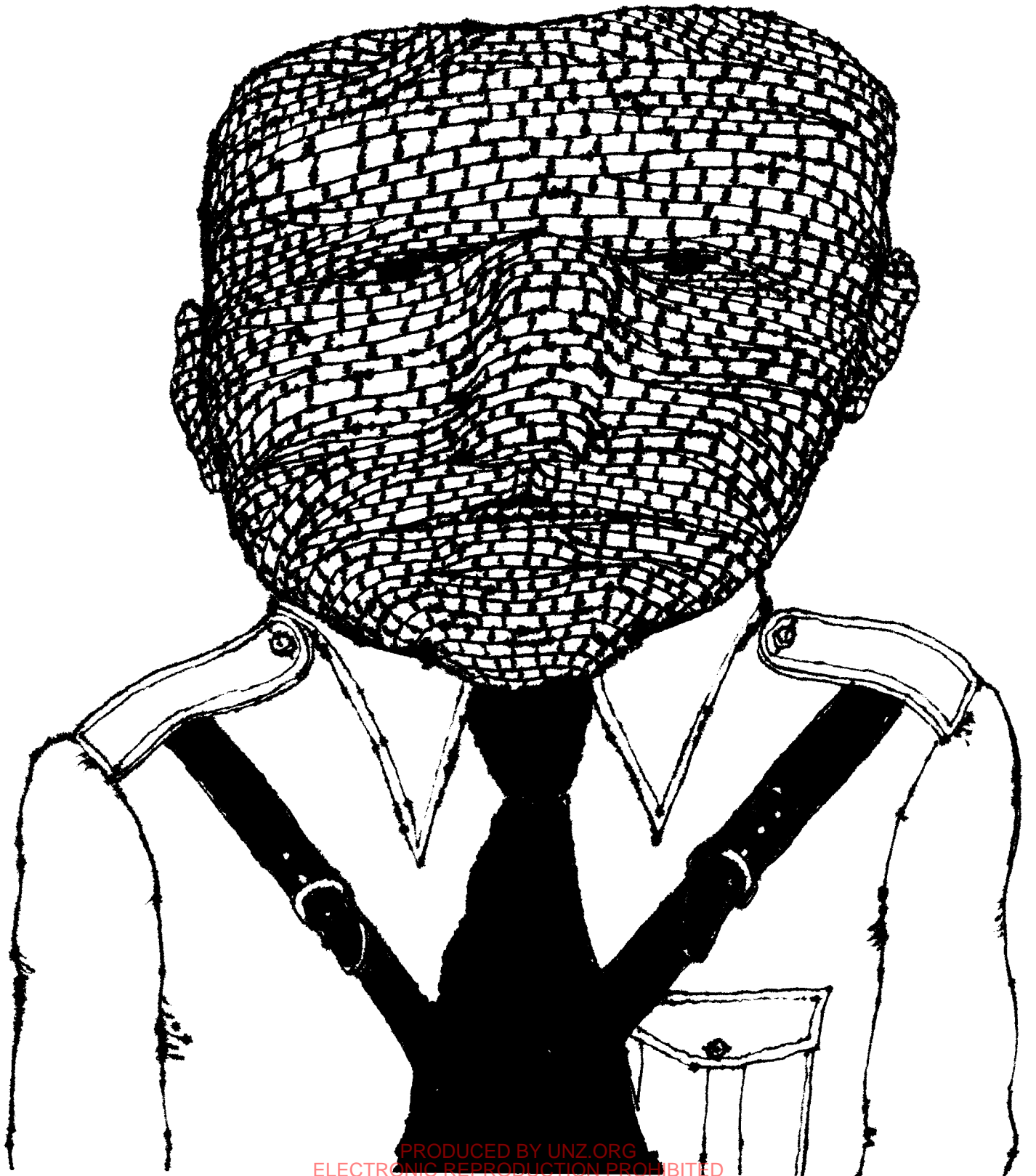
There were no investigations, no commissions appointed. The riot was business as usual at San Quentin, the sort of behavior the public has been taught to expect from convicts, the sort of behavior that supposedly justifies their presence in prison. As soon as order was re-established, this latest skirmish in the continuing prison race war was forgotten—by everyone except the convicts. They surveyed the ashes at San Quentin and knew that the bloodbath would be re-enacted again and again unless something changed. No one else cared, so they decided to make the changes themselves.

THE TREMORS THAT have shaken society-at-large during the ’60s have only gradually, and in waves of diminished strength, reached places like San Quentin. But they have made themselves felt, creating a situation favorable to change among the inmate population. The “old” convict was poorly educated and largely unaware of what was taking place outside prison walls. He internalized society’s view of him as human refuse and frequently spent his prison years in self-annihilating behavior. If he clashed with the administration, it was either through acts provoked by inarticulate, bottled-up rage, or through the collective hysteria of the race riot. In recent years, however, there has been an influx of prisoners who are of a new mold. The “new”

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Illustrations by Stephen Osborn

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prisoner might be a drug user or dealer, a “violent” protester, a draft resister or a civil rights worker. He may or may not consider himself a political prisoner, but he appreciates the value of organization and tends to identify the system—not other individuals—as the enemy.

The January riot acted as a catalyst for channeling the deep discontent of the prisoners into a unified, political protest. After the hostility and paranoia induced by the disturbances had subsided, various inmate leaders began discussing the problem. The dialogue took place on several levels. Officially, there was the Inmate Advisory Council, a traditionally impotent body of elected convicts which negotiates minor grievances with the Warden’s Office. Discussion also went on in the unofficial channels which honeycomb a prison and provide an underground communications network. There was talk in the exercise yards, in inmate meetings during “free” time, in the cellblocks after the evening meal. Inmate leaders acknowledged the self-defeating nature of internal fighting, and the word went out that race warfare is a technique used by the prison power structure to keep the inmates divided and therefore impotent.

A truce was established between organizations like the Black Muslims and the Bluebirds (a Nazi cadre in San Quentin which organizes through contraband copies of Mein Kampf and propaganda from the American Nazi Party), and between other, more moderate groups. Because the official prison newspaper, The San Quentin News, was heavily censored by the administration—the Warden allowing no printed criticism either of the institution or the staff—several inmate leaders began to publish a one-page underground newspaper called The Outlaw.

Printed on a mimeograph machine stolen from the prison, The Outlaw quickly became an important force in shaping the new mood among the prisoners at San Quentin. By the end of the year, racial hostility had been subdued, and a serious attempt was being made to educate the inmate population about the real reasons for the desperation of prison life. By February 1968, the inmates had organized a work sit-down strike to test their new unity. The strike turned out to be the most effective unified action ever to take place at the prison, forcing a shutdown of the prison’s cotton textile mill as well as most of the other prison industries. More importantly, the work stoppage enabled the prisoners to dramatize their grievances and led the California Assembly Committee on Criminal Procedures to schedule a meeting to hear their complaints.

At this point, the prison administration became alarmed and attempted to break up the inmates’ organization. Suspected leaders were shipped out to Folsom, Soledad, and other California prisons. Guards invaded the cellblocks at all hours for nude “shakedowns” of the inmates, in part as harassment, but also to search for communications and documents. The writing, copying and distribution of The Outlaw became more difficult. Finally the mimeograph machine, which had been kept one jump ahead of the guards for several weeks, was seized. The paper continued to appear periodically, however, testifying to the inmates’ ingenuity and political ties with the outside world. The copy was still written on the inside, but it was then smuggled to sympathizers outside the prison. There, 5000 copies were mimeographed and mailed back into the prison, picked off from the mail room, and transported to prison buildings in a laundry bag. Bundles of The Outlaw were

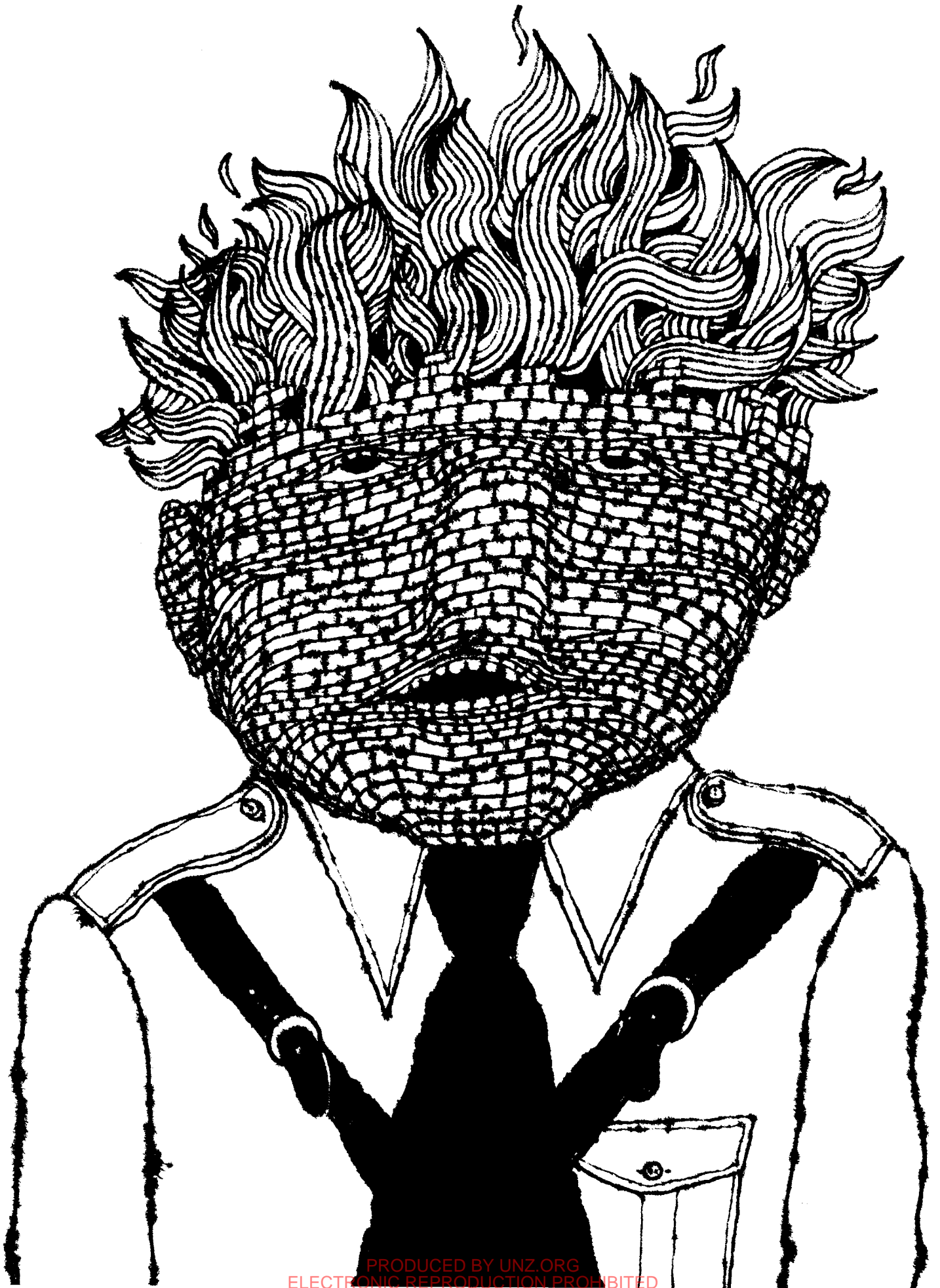
dropped at key cells in each cellblock during timed intervals in the guards’ rounds. From there they were distributed to each prisoner. One copy was placed on Warden Nelson’s desk to await his arrival in the morning.

The July 1, 1968 issue of The Outlaw illustrates the situation inside the “joint” at that time. Another wave of racial distrust had just been stimulated by the prison power structure—mainly through the activities of guards who went from one group of inmates to another, conveying supposed threats and fomenting racial hatred. “Some of us don’t seem to know what side we’re on,” said the paper. “We’re obsessed with near-sighted disputes based on race, ideology and so on. . . . We permit them to keep us at each other’s throats. But a handful of us are calling for UNITY. This is for a purpose. We want to crush this empire that has been erected on our suffering. We call for 4000 united convicts. . . . We will lose everything if we play into the CDC’s [California Department of Corrections] hands and let them move us into a riot situation. Don’t let BIG RED win at this point in the game! All he needs is a riot situation. . . . Don’t let the pigs harass you into a bad move. . . . Let’s get it together for a while.”

The Outlaw went on to remind convicts of the Unity Day planned for August, 1968. The August demonstration was an almost totally successful example of the new inmate solidarity. It was a widely publicized protest, with nearly all of the San Quentin convicts remaining in their cells over the weekend to prove that they spoke with one voice about prison conditions. Large crowds of sympathizers massed outside the prison walls, and big-name rock bands played to support inmate grievances.

Writing about the event, associate warden James Park said, “. . . San Quentin provided a testing site for a new type of prison revolt planned and executed by a mixed group of prisoners, former prisoners, academic penologists and adherents of various New Left philosophies.” The protest was a success, he admitted, “because they demonstrated, perhaps for the first time in American penal history, that outsiders could conspire with prisoners to cripple the normal operations of a prison. The age-old dissatisfactions of the convict were transformed into a well-planned and sophisticated attack on state laws and policies, the operations of the paroling agency, the limitations on legal rights of parolees, the indeterminate sentence, and other issues far removed from the usual minor food grievances.”

Park was correct in suggesting that the protest was stimulated by something more than San Quentin’s notoriously bad food. As a result of their organization, the inmates had been able to draw up an eloquent bill of particulars damning the entire California penal system. Highest on the list was the California Adult Authority, the chimerical and antagonistic board in charge of paroles. Inmates prepare for months to have their parole meeting, only to face men who are neither penologists nor psychiatrists, but often hostile political appointees, former police officers, district attorneys, etc. A prisoner cannot be represented by an attorney nor can he present testimony in his own behalf. As one prisoner put it, “Whether or not you get paroled depends on what kind of mood the parole board is in.” Given the people who sit in judgment, it is more likely than not to be a bad one. A former inmate recalls a session of the board in which one of the ex-policemen stood up, unbuttoned his shirt, and showed scars



left by knife wounds. He shouted at the potential parolee, "Punks like you gave me these."

The inmates also pointed out in their statement that even those lucky enough to get out on parole remain under the Adult Authority's iron fist for varying lengths of time. They complained that the parolee is given \$40, a "new" suit and a bus ticket to his destination, where he will face the business world's discrimination against ex-cons, and probably an unsympathetic and bureaucratic parole officer. Half of those paroled are back in prison within five years, a recidivism rate that has not changed in the last 20 years.

For most convicts, the indeterminate sentence is the cruelest of all the weapons arrayed against them because it prevents them from making plans with their families or for future employment. Five years to life is a common California sentence. This means that a prisoner can get out after three and a half years if he is "good" and will stay in for the rest of his life if he is "bad"—the terms being defined by the prison authorities. Not wanting to take what is commonly regarded as a moronic course in vocational training is "bad"; so is refusing to take group counseling courses which under the direction of prison officials turn into sessions in which one inmate "finks" on another or on himself.

The prisoners' document also contained myriad complaints arising from the physical conditions of the prison. Prisoners are given roommates and put into four-foot cells stacked in five tiers. Twenty-three trades courses are taught, ranging from *auto mechanics to plumbing, but less than eight per cent* of the prison population can be accommodated in them. There are the make-work prison industries, like the cotton mill, at which an inmate can earn from 2 to 16 cents an hour, redeemable at the San Quentin canteen. But inmates know that the San Quentin cotton mill is the only one in the state—and thus hardly good preparation for future jobs.

There is also the issue of intimidation by the guards, who are often racist as well as sadistic. (One guard, for instance, was heard to say during the 1967 riot: "I heard that warning ring and I grabbed me a shotgun and got to the roof so I could get me a nigger.") The prisoners pointed out that the Department of Corrections ranks very low as a state priority and that when Ronald Reagan cut the prison's budget by ten per cent in 1967, only 18 of the 389 guards were dismissed, while 23 of the meager staff of instructors and rehabilitation counselors were fired.

AFTER THE UNITY DAY PROTEST, the inmate leadership was euphoric about its ability to communicate these grievances and to have some impact on their resolution by the state legislative investigators. They worked hard to keep the racial peace and to complete a long report to be presented to the Assembly Criminal Procedures Committee, scheduled to visit San Quentin early in 1969. By the first week in February, the report had been written, edited and typed. Warden Nelson had promised that copies could be made and handed out not only to members of the Assembly Committee but also to the press; on February 12 the inmates sent the report to him for approval. Three days later the ditto masters were returned with the message that the document had been rejected. One of the leaders says, "The reasons for not approving it were the stuff of a scene for the theater of the absurd. I laughed, but it hurt just the same." Warden Nelson thought

the 78-page report altogether too pointed in its criticism both of San Quentin and of the entire state penal philosophy.

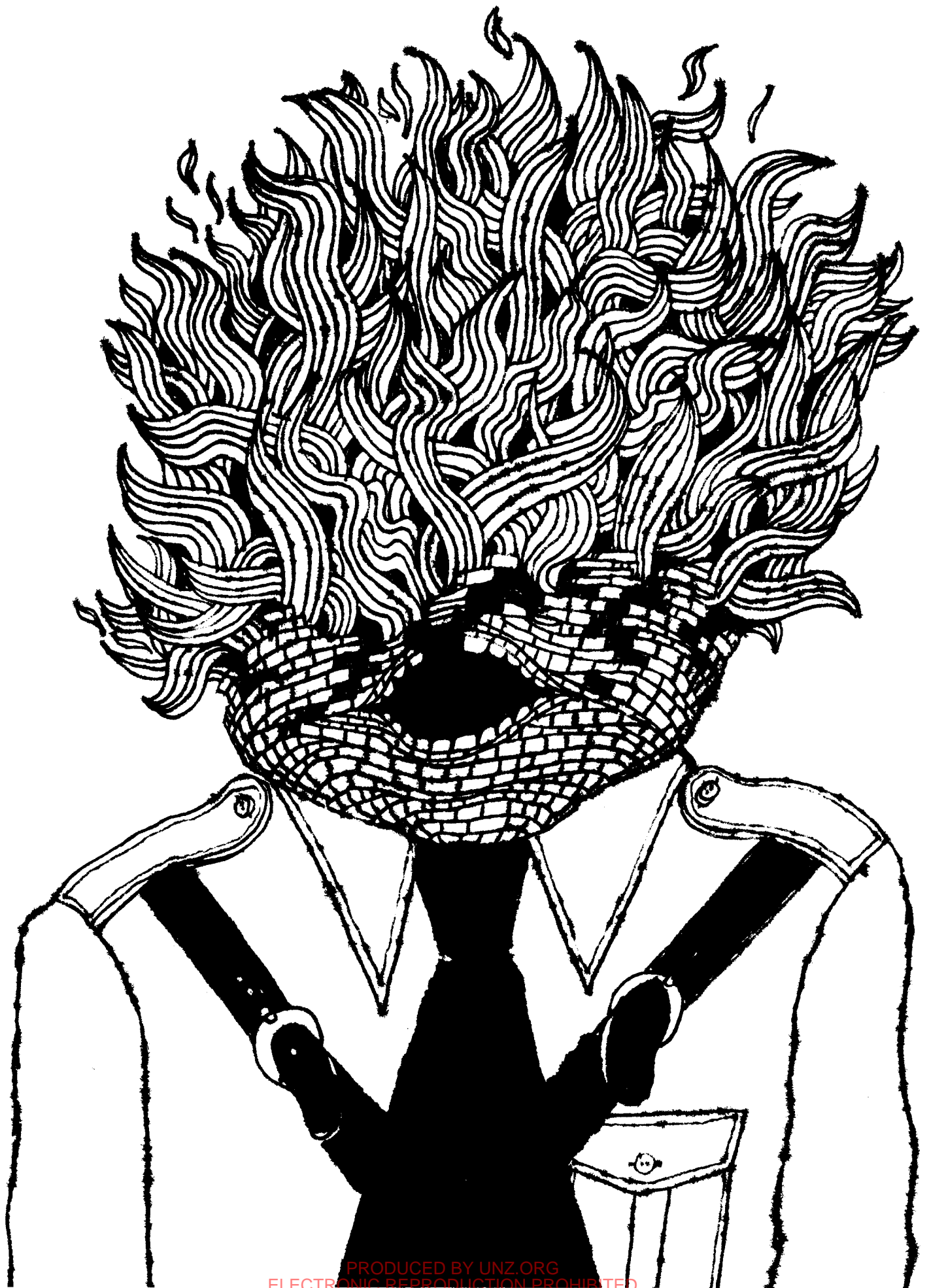
It was three days until the hearing. A frenzy of collective activity ensued as typewriters and carbon paper were appropriated and prisoners settled down in secret to reproduce the report by hand. One of the "chief editors" describes the feverish work of one of the teams this way: "We clicked, hummed, tinkled the bell and shuffled paper. We were three dudes hooked up to make an automated engine. The music of production has its soul stuff, too. . . ." By the morning of February 18, an original and four hand-made copies of the report were ready for the meeting—a report which one penologist would later call "absolutely brilliant."

The inmate leadership had originally attempted to send a summary of their report to the chairman of the Criminal Procedures Committee prior to the hearing, in order to maximize the time available for discussion. They had also requested information regarding the procedures to be followed during the hearing. But Warden Nelson refused to permit them to establish any communication with the committee. They went in cold.

On the afternoon of the 18th, three members of the Assembly Committee appeared, along with some reporters. Several inmate spokesmen were allowed to speak their piece. During one such testimony, the disguise was removed from the inmates' report and a copy was quickly handed to the committee chairman. The spirit and excitement of the occasion is captured in a recollection written by one of the inmates present at the time: "All the hassles, harangues, and sundry et ceteras coalesce into singular determination—to make a showing. Each individual gear meshed with its brother; and white man, black man, Mexican-American and Indian peel off as one vehicle in high gear. We laid it on, got down, and joined the beautiful people movement. We were grooving. My turn comes to testify. I rush up with mumbo-jumbo in my head and falter. A little help comes from my fellows; convicts as convicts, a multicolored minority group, prison pen ghetto brothers like you never saw. Then everything's all right. We're in the image of God too, man."

The hearing had come off; the report had been delivered. It didn't matter if the report gathered dust in the dreary halls of the state legislature: the prison power structure had been challenged. The cons had proved that they could get it together, and the prospects for making San Quentin livable some day seemed good.

THE CHALLENGE to the prison power structure was perhaps more menacing than the prisoners themselves realized during this optimistic time. What was happening hadn't gone unnoticed by San Quentin officials, and in the months that followed, every attempt was made to break the back of the prisoners' movement. Several of the inmate leaders, made visible during the visit of the investigating committee, were picked off and shipped out to other prisons. Requests for meeting rooms were denied to racial groups like SATE (black) and Emplayo (chicano), which had worked to build unity within the prison population. Men were kept locked up in the various wings to minimize informal meetings on the "free yard," thus blocking the exchange of information. Activities at the prison were kept to a minimum, and once again guards were passing manufac-



ured threats among antagonistic racial groups whose hatreds had just barely been brought under control. Worst of all, inmates watched helplessly as guards smuggled guns, knives and raw materials for weapons into the hands of those most likely to use them on other inmates. The system by which the prison ran was in peril, and the power structure struck back at the inmates' organization by once again dividing to conquer.

A few short months after the February triumph, the solidarity movement at San Quentin was coming apart at the seams. The organization gradually deteriorated under the onslaught of the administration, and soon the "low riders," punks and racial fanatics were able to take over. The remnants of the massive planning and cooperation which had led to The Outlaw, the Unity Day protest, and the issuing of the prisoners' eloquent plea for a redress of grievances were washed away with the blood of the first killing in April, 1969.

It occurred at an evening movie. The reasons are obscure, but it seems to have been a "debt" killing rather than one based on race. The victim was a black moneylender who had loaned a sum to another party, who had in turn loaned it to the killer, who later said he committed the act because he couldn't pay back the loan and feared an attempt on his own life. While the movie was in progress in the darkened mess hall, the killer approached the victim from behind and stabbed him in the back.

With the dissolution of the united front, the prison again polarized into the most available division—black against white. The blacks, enraged by the cowardly killing in the mess hall, began to recruit avengers and to plan their reprisal. Three days later, two blacks drew knives on four whites and cut them up badly.

Over the following weekend, the whites spent their free time planning for retaliation. When it came, it was of a nature which shows that everyone, regardless of conviction, is vulnerable when race war begins in a prison. Reprisal was based on color and was therefore non-selective. The whites executed a carefully planned attack on three older blacks who had had no part in any organization or any of the previous incidents. These inmates were walking in the lower yard when they were set upon from behind by at least eight knife-wielding whites. One of the three blacks was a middle-aged man who had extremely bowed legs and was unable to run. He died almost instantly from multiple stab wounds. The second victim attempted to run, but was quickly caught and repeatedly stabbed by his younger attackers. He died on the operating table. The third man managed to knock down the first assailant to reach him and he armed himself with the man's knife. It was about this time that the tower guard fired two warning shots.

The blacks' response came on June 11, 1969 and it was launched at one of the points of maximum confusion in prison life—the evening meal. The simultaneous attacks had all the earmarks of a tactical military operation. The following description was given by an inmate who managed to escape to his cell: "When the attacks began, there was nothing but panic—not only among the prisoners, but among their keepers as well. When it was over, not a whistle had been blown, nor one gun fired. No keeper had witnessed anything, even though they all knew something was happening. Some whistle blasts and a few warning shots were almost all that would have been needed to stop the carnage.

"The relative calm was shattered by the drumming of running feet on the concrete balcony that fronts the cells on the floor above me. The quiet was rent by screams and above it all a voice screaming, 'Kill him, kill him.' Then more running and a voice not so loud, 'I'm bleeding.'

"I had no idea that similar scenes were taking place in other areas of the cellblock until sounds of running and yells could be heard at a distance. There was a wild pounding of feet on the iron stairway, and people began to pass my cell. Black faces, flushed with elation, and white faces, fearful, panicky, with eyes darting from side to side. Finally some semblance of order was restored and all were locked in their cells.

"Voices called out, and others responded. 'They got Donnie, Buck, Ramay, Arky,' said someone. 'I saw them,' said another. 'They got Dickie and Billie.' A voice asked, 'Que pasa?' The answer was, 'Cavachoes y Nuliaties.' Someone said in a rage, 'The niggers got Buck and the goddamned bull never fired a shot.' 'What color was he?' came the question. 'White.' 'Then he's a lousy motherfucker. He should have shot the niggers.'

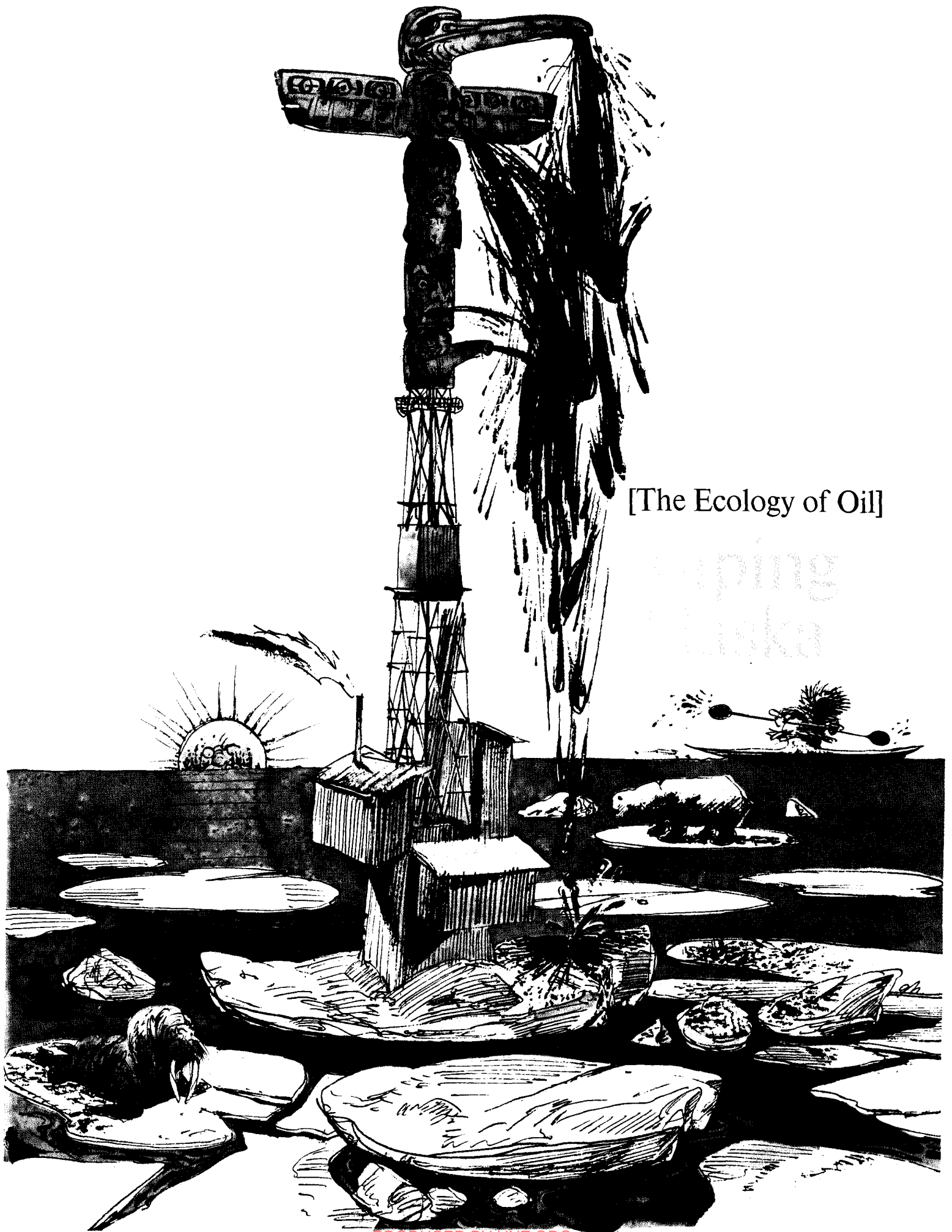
"From the cacaphony, a voice emerged, '. . . and they let him lay there and die. The medical aide, he sure took his time about doing anything for him. They could have put a needle in his lung and drawn the blood out. He drowned in his own blood.'" (The man, Buck, did die later on—miraculously, the only fatality.)

Now it is the blacks who will live in fear until the next time. One of the Nazis says, "Now I'm mad. Seven of my white brothers are in the hospital. If we swallow our pride, we'll have to take a back seat to the niggers." The beginnings of these tragic episodes, if indeed rational beginnings can be assigned to them, have now been forgotten. Reprisal follows reprisal in this, the closest thing to perpetual motion inside the American prison system. The attempt to create a united front against the insidious prison power structure has been abandoned. It has been replaced by fear and suspicion, and the only box score convicts care about now is by color: three blacks murdered and one badly wounded; one white murdered and eight in the hospital.

Places like San Quentin are society's dirty linen, and they are kept as far out of public view as possible. The prison is a source of embarrassment to the body politic, an indication of the extent of its failure. But it is also a metaphor—not only for the human predicament, but also for the way that power shapes men to fit its own ends. In a poignant understatement, one of the younger prison guards described what has happened at San Quentin over the last two years. "The killings could have been averted," he said, shaking his head, "if we had let the convicts work out their own problems. But no, we stepped in and cut off any chance for peace." Now things have returned to normal and are firmly out of control.

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[The Ecology of Oil]

Waiting
in
Alaska