

VICTORIAN PRISONERS ACTION COMMITTEE

The past two months have been very busy for the Victorian Prisoners' Action Group.

1) **Bill O'Meally**

Our campaign for the release of Bill O'Meally has been rapidly developing and has received some reasonable press reportage. When the new State Cabinet was announced in April (following Hamer's electoral victory) we immediately forward a fifteen point submission to the new Social Welfare Minister, Dixon, calling on him to support O'Meally's release. We are hoping that 39 year old Dixon will pursue a more enlightened policy than his 'old-guard' predecessor, Houghton.

We are also campaigning for the placement of a newspaper advertisement in a daily paper outlining the facts of O'Meally's case: how he is the longest serving inmate, how he was flogged, how he spent 18 years in 'H' (Hell) Division, how he was reduced to 5 stone after 13 months on dietary deprivation, how he contract scurvy, how he was bashed on numerous occasions, and how he is the victim of a cruel persecution campaign by the State government who fear that if he is released he could speak up and bring them undone.

As part of the campaign for an advertisement we conducted a very successful raffle of three items made by Bill O'Meally in the Hobby Workshop at Pentridge. Five hundred tickets were sold at La Trobe University (where students have taken previous action for his release) and also on the waterfront.

Perhaps the most important new development has been the support received from the trade unions in Victoria.

Submissions were sent by the PAG to various trade unions asking them to consider supporting O'Meally's release at the executive level and seeking support for a petition to the relevant Government authorities. At the time of writing, the following unions have either signed the petition or given moral support to the campaign for O'Meally's release:

the Building Construction Workers and Builders Labourers Federation;
the Slaters, Tilers, and Roof Workers' Union,
the Seamen's Union,
the Ship Painters' and Dockers' Union,
the Waterside Workers' Federation,
the Plumbers' and Gasfitters' Union.

the Furnishing Trades' Society,
the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union,
the Tramway and Motor Omnibus Employees' Union,
the Technical Teachers' Association,
the Miscellaneous Workers' Union,
the Australian Union of Students
the Locomotive Engine Drivers' Union,
the Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association,
the Liquor and Allied Trades Union,

Other unions are still in the process of considering the PAG's submissions.

Mr. Ted Bull, secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation (Melb.) replied to the PAG submission by congratulating the PAG "for the great work you are doing on behalf of prisoners and generally for Mr. Bill O'Meally in particular." The letter from Mr. Bull concluded "Our members sincerely hope that O'Meally will be released soon and that the prison system as we know it abolished for ever."

Mr. Ken Carr, secretary of the Furnishing Trades' Society, wrote promptly to the Premier, the Governor, and Social Welfare Minister, strongly urging O'Meally's release. His letter states in part: "O'Meally has served long enough, in our opinion, to 'pay his debt to society' - whatever that may be - or to satisfy all but the most avaricious seeker of revenge. His long sentence and his history of rebellion against the prison system make it plain that the battle of O'Meally versus the prison system has not really been won on either side." Further, "on our part, the Society would endeavour with all means at its disposal to find employment for O'Meally on his release, and as we understand the skills he gained in Pentridge include wood-turning and lathe-operating, we believe there would be a place within our industry for him... we think it is time a truce was declared and O'Meally set free."

2) Former Prisoner Speaks Out.

In accordance with the PAG of exposing the ill-treatment and brutality inherent in the prison system, we organised a public talk by a former prisoner who was released in December 1975. The prisoner had spent three of his six years inside with Bill O'Meally and so his talk was valuable in more than one respect. The talk aroused some press comment and the "Sun" newspaper reported much of what the former inmate said about O'Meally: namely, that the authorities do not want O'Meally released because he has too many scars from the beatings he has received at the hands of officers. The "Sun" did not however report the more fundamental points made by the former prisoner: for instance, the point that rebellion is inevitable wherever there is unjust repression and that the prisoners' rebellion is worthy of public support. After the talk, twenty new people joined the PAG.

The Secretary of the Prison Officers Union, J. Andrews, furiously wrote a letter to the 'Sun' protesting against the reportage of fabricated stories by anonymous former prisoners. Andrews claimed that

O'Meally was in the peak of good health and that the former prisoner had lied. The ultimate testimony will be made by O'Meally himself – if and when he is released.

3) Prisoners' Voice Magazine

The Victorian PAG has issued its first Prisoners Voice magazine. We are receiving a steady flow of subscriptions and hope to improve the quality of production for the next issue. The magazine has gone down particularly well with teachers who have used its contents as a teaching aid, not to mention students and staff of the legal studies. At La Trobe University the magazine has been placed on the official reading guide for one course. Subscriptions are three dollars for one year (six issues). Subscribce care of P.O. Box 114, East Brunswick, Victoria, 3057.

4) Will Heidt

The Group also played a role in supporting the Adelaide-based campaign for the release of a gaoled car worker, Will Heidt. Heidt had been gaoled indefinitely for contempt of court after he refused to accept the sack at Chryslers South Australian plant. The compnay had attained an injunciton restraining Heidt from entering the plant. Heidt was released after five weeks as a result of a mass campaign which earned the support of the State Labour Attorney-General. The Victorian PAG involved itself in the campaign because we felt that it raised some crucial lessons about the social function of prisons. Heidt commented after his release that he did not meet one millionaire inside. The prisons in that instance were at the disposal of the multi-national corporation Chryler. The legal apparatus – the courts, police, and prisons – were exposed for what they really are: instruments purposely constructed for the repression of socially rebellious people. The traditional ilusions about the independence and impartiality of the courts, police, and prisons received a tremendous knock on the head.

Demonstrations outside Adelaide Gaol in support of Heidt received widespread support among the prisoners who yelled out their support from behind the blue-stone wall.

4) Rockefeller

Members of the Victorian PAG attended the dmonstrations against US Vice President Rockefeller in Canberra and Sydney. It was pleasing to hear Tony Green, on behalf of the NSW PAG, remind the crowds of protestors of Rockefeller's individual rôle in the Attica massacres, in 1971.

The demonstrations were very successful. Rockefeller couldn't go anywhere without a huge police guard. I could not help but think when I saw his armoured car with twelve police escorts drive into the Lodge behind the rows of armed police in Canberra: All the crimes committed by every prisoner at Pentridge would not equal one hundredth of the moral crimes perpetrated by this mongrel.

But, the police were not there to gaol the real criminal: it was only the rebels, the demonstrators, who were pushed off the street and arrested.

6) **Lord Mayor "See No Evil . . ."**

Melbourne's Lord Mayor was the target of Victorian PAG protests when he made an inspection tour of Pentridge Prison and reported to the press that prison conditions in Victoria were amongst the best in the world. The Group issued a press statement replying to the Mayor's statements, pointing out, among other things, that he could hardly rationally reach such a conclusion on the basis of a two hour, **guided**, tour. The statement was also sent to the Mayor in letter form. It told him that he could never really appreciate the nature of the prison system until such time as he had endured the confinement of prison as a prisoner. But, it was pointed out, prisons are there for the working class people, not for gentlemen of his socio-economic bracket. A reporter from the "Sun" newspaper who had made the report of the Mayor's visit, wrote an article presenting the Vic. PAG's viewpoint. The article was not published.

7) **Inside Contacts**

Over the past few months we have experienced a healthy increase in the number of inside contacts.

Anyone wishing to contact us in Victoria can do so by writing to P.O. Box 114, East Brunswick, Victoria, 3057.

Seventeen Yard

There's an iron grille fence painted Government green
and uncomfortable seats for the aged,
and eight toilets leering into the yard
where a prisoner's dignity fades.

And a muster bell hangs from a wrought iron frame
where a warder parades on the square,
and like monkeys that cling to the iron grille fence
the prisoners of "seventeen" stare.

'Mat Williams'