

# W.A. PRISONERS ACTION COMMITTEE

The Prisoners Action Committee was initiated in October 1974 by an ex prisoner, Rupert Gerritsen and a small group of students at the University of W.A. In the past year there has been no shortage of activities to undertake but whether we have been effective in achieving any changes in the W.A. "criminal justice" system is another question. There is a mailing list of about 30 people but usually five to ten people attend the monthly meetings, most of whom have had direct contact with the prison and legal systems from all angles.

Our biggest problem has been our failure to attract more ex-prisoners to our group. We have managed to make contact with prisoners inside but none so far have joined us on their release - (we have had to tread warily in this area for fear of reprisals by the authorities on prisoners who try to establish contact with us) - this year we plan to undertake a "membership drive" to attract more prisoner members. Our ultimate aim of course is for prisoners and ex-prisoners to run the organisation completely with non-prisoners acting as advisers and helpers when needed.

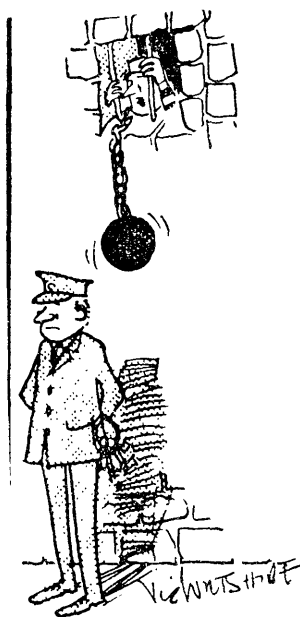
## ACTIVITIES

We have undertaken a number of campaigns - some successful others not. One of our first actions was to try and obtain clarification of visiting regulations at W.A. prisons. A friend of one of our members had been denied entry to a prison on the grounds that he was "improperly dressed" (shorts and singlet on a hot summer's day) and on another occasion a member who had visited this prison on a number of previous occasions was refused entry because he was an ex-prisoner. After a letter to the Department of Corrections and even a question to the Minister in State Parliament the situation still remains that anyone may be denied entry to a W.A. prison if they are deemed by the prison authorities to be a threat to "good order" or "security" though in neither of the above cases were they the reasons given. And anarchists be forewarned - the Minister's reply specifically stated that "anarchists would not be admitted" to W.A. prisons (as visitors, that is).

Internal physical conditions at Fremantle (the State's largest prison) are as bad as one would expect of a prison built as it was in the

mid nineteenth century. Thanks to the efforts of one of our members, restrictions on correspondence and visiting hours have been relaxed and conditions for remand prisoners have improved. Construction of a new prison at Canning Vale on the outskirts of Perth has fortunately been delayed for another twelve months at least. In construction design and proposed operating methods it resembles all the worst features of the U.S. psychological treatment model prison combined with electronic security and surveillance. Ultimately its capacity will be 1,000 men, more than twice the number now in Fremantle and more than the number currently imprisoned in the whole of W.A. It's construction is opposed by some members of the Department of Corrections and hopefully the rate of inflation will be its death knell.

We have also been concerned in the provision of legal aid in this State. The inadequacies of the private lawyer scheme run by the Law Society of W.A., due mainly to lack of finance, have clearly shown the need for a full time legal aid service - one that could initiate challenges to the arbitrary nature of prison disciplinary proceedings as well as publicising and enquiring into prison conditions. The Australian Legal Aid Office may well have moved in this direct-



"Phsst: Can I have my  
ball back?"

ion but its future is to say the least very doubtful under the present Federal government.

The media in this State as elsewhere accepts the statements and media releases of the department uncritically. One such press "story" about an aboriginal prisoner, notorious for his many escapes, led us to publish a reply to the "official" version of his life story inside and outside prison as well as holding a demonstration in his support outside the court where he was being tried.

On the more "academic" side of things, two seminars on the prison system have been held at which people with experience of the system as employees, prisoners and researchers have spoken. We've been asked to speak to student groups, Adult Education seminars and even to Young Libs.

As I said at the beginning of this article, it is hard to tell how effective we have been in achieving any changes in the system. Perhaps our very existence discourages some activities by the Department - certainly we seem to have had an effect on the Prison Officers Union which seems to be quite paranoiac about us - to the point of trying to persuade (unsuccessfully) the Trades and Labour Council of W.A. to "muzzle" one of our members who is a T.L.C. delegate by directing him not to make any statements about prisons without first clearing them with the Union.

I hope this outline of the Prisoner's Action Committee will give some idea of our activities and the problems we face. We would like to hear from any individuals or groups engaged in similar struggles elsewhere. Any strategies, ideas and experiences would be most appreciated.....Peter McKerrow.