

The Rise and Fall of the Angola Prison Chapter of the Black Panther Party

By Herman Wallace

In 1970, there were various pockets of unorganized resistance against cruel use of the infamous “Red Hat” dungeon – an isolated dungeon housing naked men sleeping on concrete slabs and fed one slice of bread with ½ teaspoon of the meal for the day. There was resistance against long hours of kitchen labor and beatings of prisoners by inmate guards when placed in administrative lockdown.

In 1970, Woodfox and I were in the Orleans Parish Prison where we met with members of the New Orleans chapter of the Black Panther Party. Woodfox met with them first and was later sent to Angola. I was captured in Pensicola, Fla., while on an escape, and brought back to the Orleans Parish Prison where eventually I also met with all of the same Party members. This is where I received my first political education. I met Bro. Charles, Ed, Malik, Terrible T., Red, Cloud 9 and Ron. I met Sis. Althea and Leah in the docks of the court where we all became family.

In 1971, they were all acquitted on charges related to a shoot-out with the New Orleans Police Department in the Lower 9th Ward. Ron was held in the Parish Prison on a robbery charge. I was sent back to Angola and placed in the work field to cut sugarcane. Every day men would get Disciplinary Reports or “work offense” for failure to keep up with the rest of the work line. The reports were necessary to justify the system’s scheme, creating “extra duty” on holidays and weekends.

Talking to the men on how best to stop the extra duty scheme, we began to work slower; and for those who were still unable to keep up, some of us would go to his row and cut “blind spots” that put them in the lead of the entire work line. I was targeted as a trouble maker, but nothing could be done about it since my own work was not reproachable. As a result, I was taken out of the field and forced to take a job in the “license plate factory.”

Shortly after that, Ron came to Angola and we reunited. I updated him on the conditions we faced. It was Ron who told me about Albert Woodfox and that Woodfox was working in the kitchen. Ron brought us together and we

rounded up other politically conscious brothers and periodically met on the yard discussing prison conditions and how we were going to change them.

Practically everyone in Angola held a selfish agenda, and trust was unheard of. We understood we had to first win the trust of the prison population in order to succeed.

Ron, Albert and I drafted a joint letter to the Central Committee in Oakland, CA, seeking permission to establish a chapter of the Black Panther Party on the prison grounds. That permission was formally granted. We used that document to show the men what we were a part of and the type of potential outside support we had. It gave us an edge in capturing the heartbeat of the prison – prison guards as well as the prison inmates.

Angola Chapter of the Black Panther Party's Program

- 1. Our first program centered around education. There were men who could barely read or couldn't read at all. We assigned tutors to help these men individually. Men who were educated in particular fields, such as history, geography, mathematics, law, political science and we put a strong focus on correcting mistaken ideas of the "prison code."**
- 2. We conducted exercise programs after every last meal. Part of the exercise program came with improving relations between men placed in leadership roles and prisoners in general. The idea was to formulate unity among different groups, which included Muslims, Christians, Rastafarians, as well as white groups. In Angola you were either white or black.**
- 3. We had a few well educated men who served in Vietnam and trained in military affairs. Their assignment was to conduct the physical exercise program which included hand-to-hand combat, only as a defense mechanism against anything that threatened the security of the Party's programs.**
- 4. We created several commissaries to support men who never received visits or were simply in need of particular essential items; such as cigarettes, cosmetics, or stamps for personal and legal matters.**

5. We formed a task force to meet every Thursday, behind the prison “Laundry Room,” offering support to incoming (fresh fish) prisoners who needed and wanted it. Our objective was to get to these men before the exploiters did, to protect them and give them a chance to build their courage before surrendering to the exploiters out of fear. At the time, there was a culture in Angola of rampant sexual exploitation and rape. We advocated that everyone have a right to their own sexual preference; but they have no right to force their sexual needs upon another and that it was our duty to prevent them from doing so.

Conclusion

Being in such a notorious prison, under the naked eye of the gun, rhetoric alone was not enough to overcome the southern slave systematic scheme used to operate this prison. With all of our theoretical views, it became absolutely necessary that we apply these theories to practice. It was through the practice of the above programs that we were able to win over many of the hardcore exploiters and eventually brought rape almost to a standstill.

In April of 1972, all of the inmates suspected of being “militant” were thrown in the dungeon as a result of the death of a prison guard. Shortly after the mass lock-up, Robert King, who also spent time among the Panther 12, came to Angola. Once security learned of his membership in the Black Panther Party, he too was accused of being involved in the death of the guard and immediately sent to solitary confinement. Our organizing never stopped. When we came to the CCR (solitary confinement tiers), there were no TV’s, no fans, poor ventilation, no review board, no outside yard privilege, inadequate food, and no form of education was allowed.

White and black prisoners united; and we held joint meetings to fight our common enemy. To aggravate security, we posted signs up on our cell bars that read: “George Jackson Inn,” “Huey Newton Saloon,” “Bobby Seale Command Post,” and “Lil Bobby Hutton, Servant of the People.” There were many similar signs displayed by white comrades as well. When security came to use brute force on a white prisoner, black prisoners immediately went to his defense and white prisoners did the same when a black prisoner was attacked.

To this day you often hear of high ranking security talking about the Panthers starting race wars, and how Panthers were attacking white prisoners. I have a history with Angola as far back as 1960. I was released in 1962, returned in 1967 and have been here ever since. I have never once witnessed or been a part of a racial conflict in Angola – there is no record to back up these lies, and to say that Albert and me being released into the general prison population would only have white prisoners chasing after us is nothing more than the use of racism to justify keeping us in solitary.

While in the CCR unit, King taught civil and criminal law. He filed many writs and post-convictions for prisoners and was the one who initially drafted both Albert's and my post-conviction filings. It was this filing that led to Albert's 1973 conviction being overturned 20 years later.

When I went to trial in 1974 for the death of the same prison guard, each of the witnesses who testified truthfully in my favor were vilified and threatened by the government that they were also going to be charged for the death of this guard. As a result, I stopped my attorney from placing any more prisoners in harms' way. It was at this time we sent all Panther recruits underground so as to keep them from also being framed for this murder.

**Visit www.angola3.org www.a3grassroots.org
www.angola3action.org for more information and updates on our ongoing struggle to have our convictions overturned after 37 years in solitary confinement for a murder we did not commit.**

**Herman Wallace
Angola 3**