

Betrayal Behind Bars

Prisons are, by definition, unhappy places for those forced to inhabit them. But the expression of this discontent in widespread rioting and destruction is a recent phenomenon. Barely a month passes without at least one major disturbance hitting the headlines.

Meanwhile the Prison Officers' Association (POA) appears to be locked in constant conflict with the Home Office. Never has morale among prison officers seemed so low, or industrial relations so bad. It appears ironic that this situation should exist only months after the implementation of a radical restructuring of working practices designed to bring lasting peace to the jails.

'Fresh Start', as the package is optimistically entitled, was formulated in the wake of the prison officers' overtime ban in April 1986 which led to widespread rioting and devastation in 18 prisons. The Home Office strategy was to buy out the excessive overtime (average 16 hours weekly per officer), on which the prison service had come to depend, with a greatly increased basic salary and the option for officers of contracting-in to a standard nine hours overtime per week, to be gradually phased out over the coming years.

The pay-off seemed to be that the POA would lose one of its strongest weapons, short of strike action - the overtime ban. It would also have to abandon the restrictive practices which had become characteristic of the prison service. The by-word of Fresh Start is flexibility. In return the package promised a unified career structure, so that all future governors would have to work their way up through the ranks, and enhanced regimes for prisoners.

A period of protracted negotiation followed the proposal before the POA

national executive eventually recommended acceptance to its members. Suspicion remained, and it was obvious from the outset that the introduction of Fresh Start would be no easy matter.

Staff increases were clearly necessary to compensate for working hours lost through the reduction in overtime. It is ostensibly disputes over the numbers of additional staff needed to operate Fresh Start that are at the heart of the current difficulties. The Home Office sent assessment teams to each prison to calculate the staff complement required to make the new working arrangements feasible. The POA contends that these assessments fall far short of necessary levels. Local branches at over 30 prisons have now voted in favour of industrial action and this number seems set to rise. The membership of the POA, who gave the Fresh Start settlement their overwhelming support, now feel they have been betrayed.

Far from enjoying enhanced regimes, prisoners are finding that staff shortages are resulting in restrictions. Predictably some of the most popular activities - evening classes, association

and sport - have been the first to suffer. Priority in staff allocation is given to the essentials such as court escorts and security duties.

Prisoners have no effective legitimate channels through which to air their grievances and it is thus inevitable that riots are becoming a more commonplace feature of prison life.

This plays into the hands of the POA, who have always argued the case for staff increases by drawing attention to the more difficult and dangerous aspects of their job. However, it will almost inevitably backfire for prisoners, as increased security and more repressive regimes are introduced into the relatively liberal prisons which have borne the brunt of the disturbances so far.

Fresh Start now appears to prison officers as a cynical strategy designed to bring peace to the jails not by enhancing the pay and conditions of officers and improving prison regimes, but by neutralising the POA and cutting costs. The result to date has been anything but peaceful and it remains to be seen whether Fresh Start is likely to come to anything other than a sticky end. •

Una Padel



Low morale has become endemic in the prison service