

Was the Attica Prison Uprising Successful?

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The Attica Prison Uprising: A Symbol of the American Prisoner Rights Movement

Introduction

On September 9, 1971, 1,281 prisoners of the Attica Correctional Facility assembled together with 42 hostages, 29 demands, and a dire need for change. Located in Attica, New York, the facility housed 2,250 inmates at the time but had a maximum capacity of 1,600. Granted one toilet paper roll a month, one shower a week, and 63 cents per day for meals, one person incarcerated at the facility equated the conditions to the “plantations in slavery.”¹

By September, tensions between people incarcerated at the Attica Correctional Facility and the correctional officers reached a turning point. Various conflicts spurred thousands of incarcerated people into action, and within a number of hours, they had taken control of the prison’s exercise yard, assigned tasks to various people, and voted upon a list of demands. For the next three days, they negotiated with Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald. However, Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York at the time, cut the peaceful negotiations short and ordered the violent and unorganized retaking of the prison. A helicopter dropped tear gas into the yard, and by 9:46 am, 1,000 state troopers, correctional officers, and other law enforcement officials entered the prison. By the end of the retaking, law enforcement had killed 29 incarcerated people and 10 hostages. Combined with the three incarcerated individuals and one guard that the incarcerated people killed during the initial rebellion, the Attica Prison Uprising became the most deadly prison uprising in United States history.

Immediately following the retaking, correctional officers tortured the incarcerated people involved in the rebellion, and widespread misinformation proliferated as state officials meddled

¹ Davies, Dave. "How the Attica prison uprising started — and why it still resonates today." October 27, 2021. In *Fresh Air*. Podcast, audio, 37:22.

with investigations. No law enforcement officers faced indictment for their crimes, and the “war on drugs” campaign of the 1970s included reversals of most of the reforms made by the New York State Department of Corrections to provide better medical care, education, and legal services to incarcerated people. The Attica Prison Uprising still had a long-lasting impact on America’s culture and people’s attitudes toward the prison system. Hence, the question arises:

Was the Attica Prison Uprising successful?

Literature Review

Various accounts interpret the successes and failures of the Attica Prison Uprising differently. Shortly after the Attica Prison Uprising, criminologists John Pallas and Bob Barber published the 1971 journal article “From Riot to Revolution” in *Issues in Criminology*. Pallas and Barber held a more optimistic view of the uprising, stating how incarcerated people forged alliances across racial and political barriers, built off of prior prison rebellions, and increased awareness of both their immediate conditions and their broader concerns about capitalism and systemic oppression.² Pallas and Barber considered the Attica Prison Uprising a successful and necessary step in the prisoner rights movement toward abolition. In 2016, Robert T. Chase extended this view in an article published in the *Boston Review*. Given the article’s 2016 publication date, Chase had better context about the long-term effects of the Attica Prison Uprising when writing this article than Pallas and Barber did in their 1972 journal article. As a result, Chase conceded that state officials did conceal the truth of the Attica Prison Uprising from the public, and the prison system today continues to be the same, if not worse, than the system the incarcerated individuals in the Attica Correctional Facility fought against in 1971. However,

² John Pallas and Bob Barber, "From Riot to Revolution," *Issues in Criminology* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1972), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909753>.

Chase also mentioned some crucial improvements made after the uprising—including how civil rights lawsuits by incarcerated people increased by 789%, and some judges more frequently ruled in favor of incarcerated people in order to prevent such a brutal uprising from occurring again.³ Furthermore, in 1985, incarcerated people in a prison uprising in Tennessee referenced and took inspiration from the Attica Prison Uprising, going as far as to hold a cloth reading “Remember Attica!!”⁴ The Attica Prison Uprising hence had a significant rippling effect, even if the prison system more or less continued to deteriorate afterward.

Lewis Steel, an observer of the Attica Prison Uprising who assisted the incarcerated participants in negotiations, contrarily argued in a 2016 article in *The Nation* that the Attica Prison Uprising could not be considered successful until people made a long-term, permanent dent in the American prison system. Steel explained that the prison system has become harsher, with increased repression, higher mandatory minimum sentences, more overcrowding, and a lack of general public awareness or sympathy for the conditions of incarcerated people.⁵ In consequence, Steel asserted that the Attica Prison Uprising could not be considered to have a positive legacy. In comparison, a more recent article published in 2021 by Stephen Perez Jr., claimed that the Attica Prison Uprising signified a “touchstone of radical activity against mass incarceration and racial capitalism,” an important development even if the American prison system continued to decline after the rebellion.⁶ Perez asserted that the uprising’s symbolic significance as the climax of the prisoner rights movement and the movement against racism and

³ Robert Chase, "Slaves of the State: Prison Uprisings and the Legacy of Attica," Boston Review, last modified November 11, 2016, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/robert-chase-attica/>.

⁴ Chase, "Slaves of the State: Prison Uprisings and the Legacy of Attica," 2016.

⁵ Lewis Steel, "Understanding the Legacy of the Attica Prison Uprising," *The Nation* (New York City, NY), September 26, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/understanding-the-legacy-of-the-attica-prison-uprising/>.

⁶ Stephen Perez, Jr., "Behind the Steel Bars of History: The Post-Civil Rights Era Radical Prison Movement," *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity* 7, no. 1 (November 2021), <https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal/vol7/iss1/1>.

capitalism as a whole counted as a partial success. **With these perspectives in mind, although the Attica Prison Uprising may have been materially unsuccessful, the rebellion remains a potent symbol of the prisoner rights movement because of its ability to build upon the Black Power Movement and prior uprisings, thereafter leading to the incarcerated people's creation of a short-lived, racially unified community representing their ideal America.** In parallel, the brutal retaking of the Attica Correctional Facility epitomized the violent callousness of law enforcement and the dire need to rethink the punitive nature of American society.

The Prison Reform Context of the 1950-1970s

In the 1950s, a rehabilitative-focused penological approach spread throughout the United States partly as a response to an uptake in prison rebellions and crime. Between April 1952 and September 1953, 30 uprisings transpired, more than in the preceding 25 years as a whole.⁷ Like in the 1920s, a therapeutic prison model proliferated in the United States which related criminal behavior to a curable mental condition.⁸ However, attempts at implementing a rehabilitation-oriented prison system in the 1920s and 1930s were unsuccessful because of the lack of adequate training for correctional officers, overcrowding, and continued brutality within correctional facilities. In effect, in the 1950s, officials pushed for a more developed treatment-based prison system known as the “medical model” in order to effectively reform the prison system and prevent prison rebellions.⁹ James V. Bennett, the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons from 1937 to 1964, reflected this belief, claiming in an interview that “under proper leadership and with adequate rehabilitation programs [prisoners] could be made good

⁷ Jamie Harris, *Social Movement Lessons from the US Prisoners' Rights Movement*, ed. Kelly McNamara, <https://www.sentienceinstitute.org/prisoners-rights#early-history-of-us-prisoners%E2%80%99-rights>.

⁸ David J. Rothman and Norval Morris, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison the Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998), 151-175.

⁹ Rothman and Morris, *The Oxford History of the Prison the Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, 1998.

citizens.”¹⁰ Bennet consequently promoted the implementation of various education classes, counseling, and better medical and psychiatric care in prisons. The Chino State Prison in California practiced these rehabilitative ideas, as counselors stationed themselves in each unit, and people incarcerated at the facility interacted and resolved issues together in group discussions. The Soledad State Prison in California similarly had counseling and education programs, libraries, and gyms.¹¹

By 1970, the general penological belief around rehabilitation lost substantial support, and the prison system became more repressive. Murder rates did decrease by 6.9% from 1946 to 1962, but prison rebellions continued throughout this period, causing opposition to the rehabilitation idea by people across political parties.¹² Like in the 1920s, three main factors attributed to the failure of the rehabilitative approach: the lack of training of correctional officers, the disproportionate power they still had over incarcerated people and psychiatrists, and the continued mistreatment of incarcerated people in correctional facilities. For instance, the Jackson State Prison, accoladed for its progressive reforms, faced rampant overcrowding, and the New Jersey State Prison, intended for 1,190, contained 1,312 incarcerated people.¹³ One of the only doctors at the Louisiana Angola Penitentiary called it a “sewer of degradation”, and prison staff constantly beat and sexually abused the people incarcerated in the prison.¹⁴ Largely discredited in the 1970s, the therapeutic model declined and the prison system became far more restrictive and oppressive.

¹⁰ James Bennett, "James V. Bennett, Oral History Interview — RFK, 11/11/1974," by Joan-Ellen Marci, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, last modified November 11, 1974, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/RFKOH/Bennett%2C%20James/RFKOH-JB-01/RFKOH-JB-01>.

¹¹ Rothman and Morris, *The Oxford History of the Prison the Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, 1998.

¹² Rothman and Morris, *The Oxford History of the Prison the Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, 1998.

¹³ Jon Blackwell, "1952: The powder keg blows," *The Trentonian* (Trenton, NJ), 1952, <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1952.html>.

¹⁴ Vodicka, "Prison Plantation - The Story of Angola," *Southern Exposure* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1978), <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/prison-plantation-story-angola>.

The Influence of the Nation of Islam on the Prisoner Rights Movement

As prisons and litigation around crime grew more draconian in the 1960s and 1970s, the Nation of Islam grew in prisons, as the organization restored the pride of many Black incarcerated people and encouraged them to take an active role in changing their conditions, particularly at the Attica Correctional Facility. The Nation of Islam, a religious and Black nationalist organization formed in 1930, required members to reject the idea of Black inferiority and adopt a sense of “racial pride and self-respect” upon joining.¹⁵ This process included removing their surname since the Nation considered it to be a “product of their slave ancestry.”¹⁶ This rejection of white superiority within the organization particularly appealed to the Black working class—many of whom had been subject to police brutality and unjust criminal sentences by white police officers and judges. As a result, when the Nation grew in size from 1959 to 1960, so did its membership of Black incarcerated people. With the help of groups within the Nation specifically assigned to recruit incarcerated people into the organization, by the early 1960s, there existed 1,500 incarcerated people in the NOI—5% of the organization’s membership.¹⁷ In one Nation of Islam mosque, Harlem Temple Number Seven, 90% of its members had criminal records.¹⁸ The Attica Correctional Facility similarly had a group of Black Muslims, and one of the key leaders of the uprising, Richard X. Clark, Black Muslim minister, had affiliations with the Nation of Islam. Furthermore, during the uprising, the incarcerated people involved specifically asked for Nation of Islam representative Minister Louis Farrakhan to visit. The racial

¹⁵ Zoe Colley, “All America Is a Prison’: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965,” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 2 (August 8, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813001308>.

¹⁶ Colley, “All America Is a Prison’: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965,” 2013.

¹⁷ Colley, “All America Is a Prison’: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965,” 2013.

¹⁸ Colley, “All America Is a Prison’: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965,” 2013.

pride rooted in the Nation of Islam's philosophy and that spread throughout Attica contextualized the incarcerated people's activism as a battle against systemic oppression, motivating them to advocate for themselves in the days leading up to the uprising.

The wins of the Nation of Islam in numerous court battles affirming incarcerated people's rights to freedom of religion and increasing their access to revolutionary reading material further drove the incarcerated people at Attica to resist their conditions. In *Cooper v. Pate*, a court battle spearheaded by Black Muslims in the 1960s, a Black Muslim incarcerated person at the Illinois State Penitentiary asserted that he faced discrimination because the prison staff prohibited him from purchasing Black Muslim reading material despite other religious publications being permitted. Although the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed this claim on the grounds that inmates surrender certain constitutional rights upon entering prison, the Supreme Court reversed this judgment. The majority opinion ruled that prisoners have the right to address their concerns in court.¹⁹ *Cooper* thus granted prisoners access to a wider range of religious and revolutionary literature, including the stirring publication of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, which further radicalized incarcerated people at Attica.

In the mid-1960s, the Nation of Islam gained less traction in the prisoner rights movement as the Nation's ideology grew less applicable to incarcerated people, and more incarcerated people at the Attica Correctional Facility realized the need for racial unity. The Nation's racial separatist and Black superiority beliefs divided Black and white incarcerated people, doing what prison staff had been trying to do all along—break up the movement. Incarcerated people began to realize the necessity of racial unity for a successful prisoner movement. As Malcolm X, a previous member of the Nation of Islam, stated, “The white man is

¹⁹ *Cooper v. Pate*, 378 U.S. (June 22, 1964). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/378/546/>.

not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly."²⁰ Later, during the Attica Prison Uprising, the group of Black Muslims took on the role of protecting the mostly white hostages, displaying the development in activism at Attica and how they built upon the Nation's ideology to pursue their specific goals.

The Legacy and Impact of George Jackson

The people incarcerated at the Attica Correctional Facility also successfully built upon the political activism of George Jackson—another key person in the Black Power Movement. A prominent member of the Black Panther Party (a Marxist-Leninist Black nationalist organization) and prisoner rights activist, George Jackson's writings and eventual death fueled the revolutionary activism and increased unity at the Attica Correctional Facility. Like many other incarcerated people during the 1960s and 1970s, much of George Jackson's radicalization occurred in prison, making him a relatable figure that many incarcerated people looked up to. While imprisoned at the San Quentin State Prison in California for an armed robbery at a gas station, Jackson read about Marxism and Maoism, leading him to form a Marxist-Leninist African American prison gang called the Black Guerilla Family in 1966. In 1970, he published *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, a book that reframed the high rates of incarcerated Black people as an issue with the criminal justice system rather than with Black people. The book sold 400,000 copies internationally in 1971, and some even considered Jackson to be the "face of the prisoners' movement," as he revolutionized and radicalized many incarcerated people at the time.²¹ With the contributions of the Nation of Islam in increasing

²⁰ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (n.p.: The Random House Publishing Group, 1964), 378.

²¹ Tiana Alexandria Williams, "Locked Down: The Hidden History of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *McNair Journal XVIII*, 2020, 4-5, <https://mcnair.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk476/files/inline-files/2020%20McNair%20Journal%20XVIII%20Version%20Tiana%20Williams.pdf>.

incarcerated people's access to various books, many incarcerated people at Attica read Jackson's book and took inspiration from it.

After George Jackson's murder at the hands of prison guards in 1971, tensions arose at the Attica Correctional Facility, and a new sense of unity grew between the incarcerated people. On January 17, 1970, George Jackson and two other prisoners known as the "Soledad brothers" were falsely indicted of murdering white prison guard John Vincent Mills. On August 21, 1971, a few weeks before George Jackson's trial for the murder of Mills, prison guards killed Jackson in an alleged escape attempt from the San Quentin State Prison. Jackson purportedly wore a wig that hid a pistol, though the details of the escape attempt remain unclear. Many incarcerated people believed the prison staff staged the event to kill Jackson, with one person stating that nobody "hid [a pistol] in their hair...then got back to the box without being searched."²² Regardless of the truth of the event, some people at Attica increasingly feared for their own lives. According to another incarcerated person at the Attica Correctional Facility, Arthur Harrison, "We assumed if they would do it with George, they would do the same thing to us."²³ George Jackson's death served as another example of the inhumanity of correctional officers and grew the incarcerated people's need to ensure they would not be the next victim, giving rise to their developing unity. Another incarcerated person at Attica Donald Noble described that Jackson's death "had a reaction on the people...to bring the people together."²⁴ As a result, the day after Jackson's death, on August 22, 1971, 700 incarcerated people at Attica of all races and political factions went on a hunger strike. They wore black armbands and followed two Black incarcerated people to the mess hall, rather than their usual procedure of following the two tallest

²² Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water* (n.p.: Vintage Books, 2017), 36.

²³ Dave Davies, "How the Attica prison uprising started — and why it still resonates today," October 27, 2021, in *Fresh Air*, podcast, audio, 37:22, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1049295683>.

²⁴ Mariame Kaba, *Attica Prison Uprising 101: A Short Primer*, illus. Katy Groves (Project NIA, 2011), https://niastories.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/attica_primerfinal.pdf.

inmates.²⁸ They sat in silence until they had to leave, showcasing their relentless solidarity with George Jackson. In the days to follow, they carried on Jackson's legacy by relinquishing all racial divides in order to collectively stand for their rights.

An Increase in Prison Uprisings (1960s-1970s)

Amidst the mass incarceration of the early 1970s and the work of the Nation of Islam and George Jackson, from 1967 to 1971, a rapid increase in prison uprisings occurred that the incarcerated people at Attica took inspiration from and built upon in their own rebellion. According to an article from *The Journal of American History*, five prison uprisings took place in 1967, fifteen in 1968, and thirty-seven in 1971—the year of the rebellion in Attica.²⁵ In all, from 1968 to 1975, 200 prisoner rebellions transpired.²⁶ Following the publication of George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, on November 3, 1970, almost all of the 2,400 prisoners at the Folsom State Prison in California refused to leave their cells. The 19-day non-violent rebellion, the longest prisoner strike in the US, stayed together in part due to the miraculous racial unity that kept the rebellion together. Leading to the strike, Muslim prisoners helped Chicano inmates hold a memorial for a Mexican journalist whom the police murdered.²⁷ The “Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform,” written primarily by the leader of the rebellion, Martin Sousa, further portrayed their unity. On the first page, the manifesto called for the “end to the injustice suffered by all prisoners, regardless of race, creed, or color” and noted that the document had been written by “all races and social segments” of the prison.²⁸ The

²⁵ Robert Chase, "We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 1, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav317>.

²⁶ Harris, *Social Movement Lessons from the US Prisoners' Rights Movement*, n.d.

²⁷ Pallas and Barber, “From Riot to Revolution,” 1972

²⁸ Folsom Prisoners, "The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform," March 11, 1970, Freedom Archives: California Prison Struggles, California Prisoners Union.

Folsom inmates labeled the prisons as “fascist concentration camps of modern America,” as they became more political and radicalized.²⁹ The incarcerated people who wrote the manifesto attacked the inherent flaws of correctional facilities, rejecting the idea that prisons exist for rehabilitation. They argued that prisons were instead for the sole purpose of forcing incarcerated people into “slave labor,” where they were treated as “personal whipping dogs.”³⁰ This manifesto of demands served as great inspiration for resistance at the Attica Correctional Facility.

Two months before the Attica Prison Uprising, a group of Attica inmates labeled the “Attica Liberation Faction” sent a list of twenty-eight demands to New York Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller with similar and at some points identical wording to that of the Folsom Manifesto. The demands included religious freedom for Muslims, improvements in working conditions, and better medical policies.³¹ Unlike in Folsom, however, a strike did not accompany the list of demands. Attica prisoners asserted multiple times in the manifesto that they were “trying to do this in a democratic fashion,”³² learning from the brutal crackdown that followed the Folsom strike. Oswald never visited the prison despite promising he would do so, and correction officers inflicted even more brutality and censorship on prisoners. Though this peaceful attempt at reforming their conditions failed, it helped lead to their much larger and more visible uprising where Oswald had no choice but to pay attention.

Around the same time as the Folsom Prison strike, incarcerated people at the Auburn Correctional Facility led a rebellion, causing several leaders of the uprising to be sent to the Attica Correctional Facility where they would later aid the Attica Prison Uprising. About a two-hour drive from the Attica Correctional Facility, the Auburn Prison Uprising’s close

²⁹ Folsom Prisoners, “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform,” 1970.

³⁰ Folsom Prisoners, “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform,” 1970.

³¹ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

³² Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

proximity made it an important agent for the revolutionary movement at Attica. In 1970, as one of the most overcrowded prisons in New York, conditions at Auburn were abysmal. Several political organizations had risen within the facility, including the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. Two people incarcerated at the facility, Kenny Mallow and Tommy Hicks, were members of the Black Panther Party and later participated in the Auburn uprising. As students in an English class taught by sociology and criminal justice professor Lucien X. Lombardo at the prison, they had experience critically engaging with reading material and current events when debating about politics in his class. In a journal article, Lombardo described the men as “cooperative students but also very independent, outspoken street-wise thinkers who tried to make their feelings about race, economics, politics and crime and justice clear.”³³ After the Auburn Uprising, the prison staff sent Malloy and Hicks to Attica, where they participated in the Attica Prison Uprising.

The Auburn Prison Uprising had many similarities to the Attica Prison Uprising, and it also had several mishaps that the incarcerated people at Attica learned from when rebelling. In November 1970, some people incarcerated at Auburn asked their superintendent if they could observe Black Solidarity Day. When the correctional officers gave no decisive answer, many Black incarcerated people refused to work for the day, instead spending the next six hours giving and listening to speeches in the exercise yard until the correctional officers sent them back to their cells in the evening. Despite correction officers promising to not punish those involved in the strike, prison administrators eventually decided to put 14 people involved in the strike in keep lock. The next morning, 400 incarcerated people refused to work until those in keep lock were released. They additionally took 50 prison staff members as hostages, whom the group of

³³ Lucien Lombardo, "Attica remembered: a personal essay," *Paideusis: Journal for Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Studies*, 1999, https://ww2.odu.edu/~llombard/resources/collected_papers/3.pdf.

Black Muslims kept safe and warm. That night, the people involved in the uprising crafted a list of 12 demands, including requests for more educational resources, such as “black culture courses” and an “improved law library.”³⁴ This coordination and organization were mimicked at Attica, where certain groups of people were similarly assigned certain tasks, and they all worked together to form a cohesive and inclusive list of demands. However, unlike the Attica Prison Uprising, the incarcerated people in the Auburn Prison Uprising only had control of the prison for eight hours. Additionally, some hostages in the Auburn Prison Uprising admitted to feeling unsafe around the incarcerated people, with one describing the environment as “rough” and that “some of the prisoners really wanted to get [them].”³⁵ In comparison, incarcerated people in the Attica Prison Uprising made a point out of keeping the hostages unharmed, both for bargaining power and to prove their humanity to the general public. Regardless, the Auburn Prison Uprising served as an inspiration for the Attica Prison Uprising and an example of what mistakes they should avoid.

The incarcerated people in the Auburn Uprising surrendered to authorities and agreed to return to their cells and discuss their demands there. Despite prison staff promising the incarcerated people that they would not face any punishment if they backed down and released their hostages, they instead faced extreme brutality by correctional officers afterward. Furthermore, 120 of the men involved in the rebellion were put into the segregation area; six of these men, known as the “Auburn 6,” were indicted. The “Auburn 6” along with other leaders of the uprising were sent to the Attica Correctional Facility by New York Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald in an attempt to remove the “militant troublemakers” that had

³⁴ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

³⁵ Martin Arnold Special to The New York Times, "Auburn Prisoners Hold 50 Hostages Eight Hours," *The New York Times*, November 5, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/05/archives/auburn-prisoners-hold-50-hostages-eight-hours.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

supposedly caused the Auburn Prison Uprising.⁴¹ Ironically, many of those Auburn transfers to Attica became the next leaders of the Attica Prison Uprising.

Context on the Grievances at the Attica Correctional Facility

The incarcerated people at the Attica Correctional Facility faced horrid conditions, similar to those at the Folsom State Prison and the Auburn Correctional Facility. Given barely six cents a day for their labor, some incarcerated people in the facility even referred to them as “slave wages.”³⁶ Furthermore, the entire facility had only two doctors who were neglectful toward the inmates.⁴⁶ The prison had so few checks and balances that even when one inmate died under one of the doctor’s care, the prison staff took no action to hold the doctor responsible, and medical treatment continued at Attica as per usual. According to Frank “Big Black” Smith, one of the leaders of the Attica Prison Uprising, “You’re not a human being anymore, you know, you’re a third-class citizen once you go to prison and that’s the way you be treated. That’s what brought the rebellion on, dehumanized conditions.”³⁷ A feeling shared among the people incarcerated in the facility, they unified together to resist those conditions. On August 30, 1971, 300 incarcerated people crowded the hospital area to peacefully call attention to the poor medical care. However, prison staff made little improvements, and the incarcerated people’s resistance only grew stronger.

Racism proliferated in the Attica Correctional Facility as well, and as more young and politically aware people entered the prison in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, the greater Black Power Movement intensified within its walls. African Americans and Puerto Ricans made up 76% of the incarcerated people working low-paid metal shop jobs, faced harsher

³⁶ *Interview with Frank Smith*, directed by Sam Pollard, Blackside, 1988, <http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/ks65hg93z>.

³⁷ Pollard, *Interview with Frank Smith*, 1988.

rules around family visitation, and received lower-quality medical treatment.³⁸ Correctional staff censored Black community newspapers, and any letters written in Spanish were thrown out. Furthermore, 40% of the incarcerated people at Attica were under thirty years old, and many were Black and Puerto Rican civil rights activists who had been inspired by the recent writings of Malcolm X, George Jackson, and other revolutionaries.³⁹ People incarcerated at Attica also gained copious knowledge through the few history and sociology classes offered in the facility. In the summer of 1971, these classes grew increasingly popular as incarcerated people read literature from Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Mao Zedong. They theorized how they themselves might concretely change their conditions. One group in particular, the Attica Liberation Faction, formed for this purpose. The group consisted of five politically active people incarcerated at Attica. One member, Herbert Blyden, had previously participated in the New York City Tombs Jail Rebellion and joined the Nation of Islam. Some of the other members were involved in the strike at the Auburn Correctional Facility. The Attica Liberation Faction would hold political classes on the weekends where they would teach incarcerated people about the ongoing injustices in the facility. By July, they had sent a list of demands inspired by the Folsom manifesto to Russel Oswald and Governor Rockefeller. The revolutionary movement at Attica reflected the greater societal push for equal rights and alternatives to capitalism, and as the incarcerated people in the facility continuously received no response for their peaceful attempts at demanding change, they started to become restless.

Growing Unity at the Attica Correctional Facility

³⁸ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017.

³⁹ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017.

In response to the growing activism in the Attica Correctional Facility, many correction officers became harsher and attempted to racially divide the incarcerated people so they could not aggregate in large numbers and rebel; however, the people incarcerated at Attica realized the necessity of racial unity and resisted their measures. For instance, Tyrone Larkins, a person incarcerated at Attica who survived the Attica Prison Uprising, explained in an interview that correction officers would give a wheelbarrow of ice to white incarcerated people on hot days, whereas the ice would be dumped on the ground for Black incarcerated people. Prison officials hoped that this would create more racial tensions between prisoners. Instead, by early July, “Nobody in the yard would pick [the ice] up. Nor white inmates, nor Black inmates, nor Hispanic inmates, nor Indian inmates,” according to Larkins.⁴⁰ Despite the attempts of the guards, solidarity grew between incarcerated people of all races as they became increasingly politically conscious.

The unity between the incarcerated people in the Attica Correctional Facility resulted in a work strike on July 29, 1970. The strike began peacefully, with a few incarcerated people attempting to negotiate for higher wages with the prison warden Vincent Mancusi. However, Mancusi ultimately rejected their requests and put those incarcerated people in keep lock and transferred others out of Attica entirely. Instead of breaking up the strike, Mancusi’s response actually fueled the prisoners to begin a larger, yet still peaceful strike, with 450 men in the metal shop refusing to work.⁴¹ The strike ended when Commissioner of Correction Paul McGinnis agreed to meet with the incarcerated people, and their few demands were finally met—wages were increased from six to 25 cents, and their maximum hourly pay rose from 29 cents to one

⁴⁰ "Former Attica Prisoner Describes Racist, Brutal Treatment That Sparked Deadly Uprising 50 Years Ago," video, 25:54, YouTube, posted by Democracy Now!, September 13, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1_juOhI4_E.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

dollar per day. Nonetheless, Mancusi remained determined to stop all prisoner activism by punishing the incarcerated people involved in the strike, and right when McGinnis left, he sent some of them to Housing Block Z, or “the Box,” where incarcerated people were often beaten by correction officers.

Sam Melville, a white person incarcerated at Attica known as the “mad bomber,” additionally helped increase unity between incarcerated people through his research and writing. Melville had been involved in far-left activism and went to the Attica Correctional Facility after bombing several government buildings in protest of the Vietnam War, exemplifying how some incarcerated people at Attica were involved in the anti-war movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and other causes prior to entering the facility. They hence had visions for society beyond improving or abolishing prisons. At Attica, though, Melville conducted research on the exploitation of prisoners and wrote a treatise called “Anatomy of the Laundry,” denouncing prison labor. Copies of the treatise spread throughout the prison, inspiring the July work strike and the deadly uprising a month later. The shared suffering faced by all incarcerated people at Attica (though to varying degrees depending on race) motivated the incarcerated people to put their racial barriers aside for the benefit of all. Incarcerated people curated this racial unity, a success of the prisoner rights movement, as a result of the preceding uprisings at Folsom and Auburn, the work and failings of the Nation of Islam, and the writings and death of George Jackson.

Context on the Beginnings of the Attica Prison Uprising

By early September, tensions between correction officers and prisoners came to a climax. The small successes of the work strike were minimal, and prison officials increasingly cracked

down on inmates in the wake of their growing activism. Effective change needed to be made soon, and different political and racial groups including the anti-imperialist organization Weather Underground, the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, and Puerto Ricans from the Young Lords Party would discuss how to make such improvements in the yard. On September 8 and 9, 1971, a spontaneous situation answered their questions. A few incarcerated people were fighting with each other in the yard until Lieutenant Robert Curtiss separated them and reported the incident to Superintendent Mancusi. Mancusi ordered that prisoners the incarcerated people be taken to Housing Block Z. When one person, Leroy Dewer, refused, guards attacked him in his cell so brutally that many incarcerated people believed they had killed him. During this time, an incarcerated person named William Ortiz threw a can of soup at a correction officer. Ortiz, put in keep lock for the action, sparked even more anger among the incarcerated people. The next morning, prison staff decided to not allow the incarcerated people recreation time after breakfast, leading to chaos as incarcerated people attacked correctional officers and took control of half of the prison.

Organizing a Racially Unified Community

The disarray that had occurred the morning of September 9 gradually developed into an organized, democratic, and racially diverse coalition of prisoners who were determined to make their demands known to the public. Tom Wicker, a journalist who observed the uprising, described the scene: “The racial harmony that prevailed among the prisoners—it was absolutely astonishing...That prison yard was the first place I have ever seen where there was no racism.”⁴² The incarcerated people appointed one person to translate all discussions and negotiations for the Spanish-speaking prisoners in the yard. Additionally, Herbert X. Blyden and Richard X Clark,

⁴² Pallas and Barber, “From Riot to Revolution,” 1972

two prisoners who became leaders of the uprising, sought out a combination of Black, white, and Puerto Rican prisoners to act as security guards. The Black Muslims put great effort into protecting the hostages and keeping them comfortable, and other inmates ensured that people equally received food without violence. They even set up a medical station to assist with the ailments and injuries prisoners had acquired during the initial riot that morning (as well as any other issues they had that were neglected by the prison's hospital). The incarcerated people finally ran an election to decide who would represent the group for major decision-making and negotiations, and they continued taking votes when writing out their list of demands. The incarcerated people in the uprising hence formed a community that meant more than what they dreamed of for the prison—they created their ideal America—one with true democracy, racial unity, and equal rights.

For the next four days, inmates negotiated their 29 demands with Commissioner Russell Oswald, and they made sure to advocate for all incarcerated people in the prison when doing so, as well as taking inspiration from prior uprisings. Several journalists, lawyers, and assemblymen/congressmen also entered the yard as observers at the request of the prisoners, and they helped with negotiations. Their demands included increasing Spanish books in the library, employing “minority personnel,” religious freedom, and other basic needs they desired.⁴³ In particular, prisoners were adamant about getting total amnesty for the crimes they had committed during the rebellion, as they did not want to face the same fate as the prisoners in the Folsom State Prison Strike and the Auburn Prison Uprising. As one of the only demands Oswald did not agree to, amnesty became a great point of contention. Furthermore, Governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to meet with the prisoners to discuss their demands, inciting even more difficulty and conflict in negotiations.

⁴³ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

Lawsuits and Legacy: Grappling with the End of the Attica Prison Uprising

On September 13, Governor Rockefeller cut the peaceful negotiations short and ordered the violent and unorganized retaking of the prison. A helicopter dropped gas into the yard, and by 9:46 am, a melee of 1,000 state troopers, correction officers, and other law enforcement officials entered the prison. The gas obscured the guards' vision, so they haphazardly shot at anything around them. One civilian hostage described, "The bullets were coming like rain."⁴⁴ Law enforcement especially targeted the leaders of the uprising, like L.D. Barkley, an outspoken person incarcerated at Attica who law enforcement shot to death.

Following the retaking, widespread misinformation proliferated and state officials meddled with investigations in order to place as much blame as possible on the incarcerated people. One deputy commissioner went as far to erroneously tell the media that the incarcerated people involved in the rebellion slit the hostages' throats and castrated them. The autopsies of the slain proved that most men died of gunshot wounds, and the only people who had firearms were law enforcement. Reporters were additionally told that "seven or eight" incarcerated people were killed, when in fact, 29 incarcerated people and 10 hostages were killed by law enforcement, compared to the 3 incarcerated people and 1 guard who were killed by the incarcerated people. In preparation for the trials that would ensue, witnesses were coerced to lie about the uprising in return for shorter sentences and other benefits, so that the incarcerated people would face complete responsibility for the deaths and destruction. Moreover, incarcerated people continued to be tortured for days after the retaking, as correction officers forced the surviving incarcerated people in the uprising to strip and crawl on the ground while being beaten with clubs. Despite the many cruel consequences of the Attica Prison Uprising, the incarcerated people were not alone in

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 2017

their fight—they had a group of lawyers doing everything possible to avenge the lives that were lost and answer the demands that began the rebellion in the first place.

Two years after the uprising in February 1973, 63 people involved in the rebellion were charged with 1,289 crimes, and no troopers or guards were indicted. A year later, the people incarcerated at the time of the uprising who had survived and the families of the murdered incarcerated people sued the State of New York, and in 2000, the state paid them 8 million dollars. In 1976, Governor Carey pardoned seven incarcerated people, reduced the sentences of two convicted incarcerated people, and dismissed the cases against 20 law enforcement officials. One could argue that the Attica Prison Uprising failed for these reasons. For instance, Lewis Steel, an observer of the Attica Prison Uprising, argued that the Attica Prison Uprising should not have a positive memory in people's minds, since the demands of the incarcerated have not been fulfilled. However, though justice lacks full achievement, and almost all of the law enforcement officials who attacked the incarcerated people and hostages faced little to no repercussions, the legacy of Attica made a dent in the prisoner movement and America as a whole. According to an article from *The New York Times* by Michael Winerip, Tom Robbins, and Michael Schwartz, at least in the short term, the New York State Department of Corrections provided better medical care, education, and legal services; implemented procedures to report pernicious prison staff; and allowed more religious freedom.⁴⁵ Although most of these changes were reversed during the “war on drugs” campaign of the 1970s, over 160 chaplains remain working in prisons today, and Muslims can wear kurfis and have their mealtimes accommodated for Ramadan. Additionally, after the uprising, the Prisoners' Legal Services of New York formed

⁴⁵ Michael Winerip, Tom Robbins, and Michael Schwartz, "Revisiting Attica Shows How New York State Failed to Fulfill Promises," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/nyregion/revisiting-attica-shows-how-new-york-state-failed-to-fulfill-promises.html>.

to provide legal services to prisoners, and there now exists far more access to law libraries within correctional facilities.

Furthermore, beyond the material improvements and failures following the Attica Prison Uprising, the rebellion affected the culture of America as a whole, with Attica becoming a symbol of prisoner resistance and the failures of the prison system. Numerous documentaries, songs, and poems were made about the Attica Prison Uprising. The uprising had also been referenced in many television shows and movies. In 1975, Al Pacino, playing bank robber Sonny Wortzik in *Dog Day Afternoon* yelled “Attica! Attica!”—an improvised line—after arguing with the police about the people he took hostage. Before shouting “Attica,” Wortzik exclaimed that he knew he would be killed regardless of what he did, yelling, “They’re gonna bury me, man... He wants to kill me so bad he can taste it.”⁴⁶ The incarcerated people in the Attica prison uprising were similarly killed at random and without reason, and the movie’s reference to that brutality and the inhumanity of law enforcement portrayed the stark imprint the Attica prison uprising left in people’s minds. The incarcerated people portrayed in Season 4 of *Orange Is the New Black*, released in 2013, likewise shouted “Attica! Attica!” when revolting, and the rebellions shown in Season 5 mimicked many aspects of the Attica Prison Uprising.⁴⁷ Hence, although much of the Attica Prison Uprising failed, it had successes in increasing awareness of the prisoner rights movement and fueling further activism.

In following prison rebellions, the Attica prison rebellion became a quintessential point of comparison. In the New Mexico State Penitentiary Riot in 1980, a newspaper article from the Albuquerque Journal compared the Attica Prison Uprising and the rebellion in New Mexico,

⁴⁶ *Dog Day Afternoon*, directed by Sidney Lumet, Warner Bros., 1975.

⁴⁷ *Orange Is the New Black*, directed by Andrew McCarthy, 2013.

with the underlying fear of the New Mexico riot having as vast of an impact as Attica.⁴⁸ Likewise, in the 1985 prison rebellion in Tennessee, the incarcerated people involved called for the public and law enforcement to “remember Attica.”⁴⁹ The Attica Prison Uprising evolved into far more than a failed rebellion—it became a symbol of what would occur if the horrors of the American prison system remained unchecked and of the capabilities of incarcerated people when unified. Today, though prison conditions have only gotten worse and the impact of Attica has become less poignant on the public’s minds, people must remember the efforts of every individual involved in the Attica Prison Uprising, what they died for, and what the uprising means for the United States. The rebellion signified the build-up of many coalescing movements against systemic oppression, and the increasing need for racial unity to organize a cause. As a 1972 report by the New York State Special Commission on Attica stated, “Attica is every prison and every prison is Attica.” The inhumane conditions at the Attica Correctional Facility were not unique to Attica, and those same conditions, if not worse, prevail in jails and prisons throughout the United States today. Attica serves as a grim warning of what will occur if those conditions do not change.

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⁴⁸ Richard Beer, "Riot in New York Helped to Spur Prison Changes," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 30, 1980, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/262779755>.

⁴⁹ Chase, "Slaves of the State: Prison Uprisings and the Legacy of Attica," 2016.

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