

Protracted torture and abuse at UK “flagship” prison

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A recent exposé by the *Guardian* newspaper of the systematic torture carried out at Wormwood Scrubs prison in London provides a revealing portrait of the inner workings of the Blair government’s “tough on crime” regime.

Wormwood Scrubs was previously held up by the Prison Service as its “flagship” institution despite its overcrowded state and persistent rumours and allegations of a regime of brutality towards and intimidation of prisoners. A police investigation into allegations of staff brutality at the prison during the late 1990s resulted in the suspension of 27 prison officers and the convictions of six for assault.

In 1996, the prison was condemned following an inspection by Sir David Ramsbotham, the former chief inspector of prisons. Ramsbotham returned to the prison in 1998 to monitor what progress had been made. “Nothing had happened,” he said, “and the rumours were even stronger. It was in the most terrible state, almost every part was in a state of shambles and the POA [Prison Officers’ Association] seemed to rule the place.”

Ramsbotham expressed his concerns regarding the future consequences of the routine beatings of prisoners, stating: “If you treat prisoners in the way they were treated in Wormwood Scrubs you will turn them into bitter citizens who will reoffend, and therefore the prison service is not protecting the public.”

The *Guardian* expose is based on a number of court documents, arising from previous and present attempts by 45 inmates to sue the Prison Service. The prisoners alleged they were assaulted and abused by prison officers while serving their sentences. The service settled more than 30 cases out of court and was forced to pay a total of £1.7 million in compensation. In 14 of the cases, the service “submitted to judgment.” This amounted to an admission that it had no defence against the claims brought and would not contest numerous allegations of beatings, mock executions, death threats and other abuses by staff.

Over a four-year period, 122 separate instances of assaults by officers were recorded. To settle one of the cases, the Prison Service paid tens of thousands of pounds to a former inmate who alleged that he had been raped and beaten by a prison officer. The officer accused of the rape denies the allegations and is still employed at the prison. Other prison officers who are alleged to have taken part in the mental, physical and sexual abuse of prisoners still remain employed by the Prison Service and deny the charges.

A number of relatives of victims have called for a public inquiry

into the abuses at Wormwood Scrubs. Daniel Machover, a solicitor involved in the exposure of the practises conducted at the prison, said, “It’s unthinkable that this level of torture can happen to so many prisoners over such a length of time without there being a public inquiry into how a prison can get this bad.”

An article published by the *Guardian* on December 11, entitled “Prisoners tell of hanging threats by officers holding nooses,” records extreme brutality that borders on attempted murder. The first assault admitted to by the prison service took place on April 8, 1994. The court judgment stated that the prisoner “was taken violently to the floor and held face down by several officers.

“One of the officers placed a baton around the claimant’s throat, choking him. His arms were pinned behind his back and he was carried to the segregation unit.

“While he was being taken [there] other officers joined those who had originally assaulted him. The claimant was further assaulted by officers punching him while he was being carried and his arms and ankles being twisted.”

The prisoner was denied his right to see a doctor and the board of visitors. Describing the attempt by the Prison Service to cover up the attack, the court documents state, “No action was taken by the defendant [the Prison Service], its servants or agents, to investigate properly, discipline or punish those involved in the assaults following his complaint on April 14, 1994.”

In another case, an inmate described his harrowing experience in August and September of 1995. The prison service has admitted that officers placed a noose around his neck. The prisoner described how he was met by the prison’s “welcoming committee” consisting of six officers who assaulted him. This included him being “squat searched” and kicked in the testicles.

In September, the prisoner moved cells and was again subjected to a violent attack orchestrated by a “well-built officer with a Welsh accent” who was one of four prison officers. The documents stated, “As the claimant lay on the floor, his right leg was pulled out, and [he] felt an officer jump on his leg. He believes it was the officer with the Welsh accent. The prison officer with the Welsh accent said: ‘Listen to me, you Celtic bastard, we will kill you.’ He also stated: ‘We will get away with it. Don’t think we haven’t done it before,’ or words to that effect.”

During a further beating by up to eight officers, the prisoner lost consciousness. Recounting his experience, he said, “I could see a lot of excitement in them, they looked as if they were enjoying it. I

was in excruciating pain. I'd never been in pain like that before.”

During the course of these beatings, the prisoner's legs were swollen to three times their normal size. During the following days, as he attempted to nurse himself, he was again beaten. This time he was beaten, pinned to the floor and told he was going to be hanged there and then, and that they would “get away with it” by making it look like a suicide. The officers held the inmate up, gagged him with a towel and placed a noose fashioned from a sheet on the cell bed around his neck. The prisoner, believing he was about to be murdered, wet himself. He said that an actual execution was only prevented when a senior officer saw what was going on and ordered the assailants to desist.

The Prison Service admitted that this event took place and that a noose was placed around the prisoner's neck.

Another case documented by the *Guardian* was that of an Irish prisoner who was subject to constant torture beginning on September 7, 1997. During the course of the beatings, involving up to eight prison offers, he almost died

The court documents report that the “claimant feared for his life as he felt his eyes bulging and he was struggling to breathe. The officers shouted racist taunts...calling him an Irish bastard...”

Later, he was taken to a strip cell and told to stand in a star position. The prisoner said that he believed a Wormwood Scrubs governor was present at this time.

Additional physical mental and abuse is cited in the documentation including the following: “[The] officer [name redacted]...proceeded to choke the claimant with one hand while prodding him with the other. At the same time the officer allegedly said, ‘You terrorist scum, you'd better plead guilty to assaulting me, because if you don't we're going to fucking hang you, we hang shit like you.’ Another officer then said ‘get the fucking sheet.’ The officers left the cell.”

The *Guardian* reported that the inmate has now been released but was “left so mentally scarred that he will need residential care to cope with the damage.” He has repeated nightmares and flashbacks regarding his time in prison.

According to the documents, another prisoner faced a series of severe beatings and was told he was going to be hung in his cell. A brown sheet was brought into the cell and knotted to form a noose. One of the officers involved noted that the prisoner's head was swollen from a previous battering and said they would need to delay a hanging until the swelling receded. One officer said, “It looks like we are not going to have a hanging tonight.”

The inmate was then told he would be charged with assaulting an officer the previous day. In relation to this case, the Prison Service admitted that officers “committed misfeasance in public office by causing false disciplinary charges to be brought” and that the assault charge brought against the prisoner by an officer was based on a “a desire to cover up his own and other officers' unlawful use of force.”

The reports coincide with new statistics showing that a record number of people are now incarcerated in British prisons. The Prison Service announced on October 17 of last year that a total of 74,023 inmates were incarcerated at the time. This figure is increasing at a drastic rate. On the same day, the Prison Service announced that the number of new inmates had increased by 983

since August—the equivalent of two medium-sized jails.

Official capacity for the Prison Service in England and Wales is 76,700. This situation means that just 700 places were officially available to hold further prisoners. Proposals are now being mooted within the Home Office to begin the incarceration of prisoners in police stations cells, as the numbers being jailed are set to rise to over 80,000 in the near future. By 2009, the prison population is projected to be 93,000. The UK has the highest prison population per capita in Europe. Overcrowding is rife, with more than 14,000 prisoners forced to “double up” and share a cell designed for one person.

Adrian Thomas of the crime-reduction charity NACRO said: “We are without doubt the prison capital of Europe. This figure, the highest ever, is symptomatic of an ongoing crisis in the way we view and tackle crime—seemingly more often about appeasing a reactionary and vociferous minority than dealing with the real issues or with what works best.”

The figures cited are despite the oft-repeated announcement from the Home Office that the policies of the Blair government have resulted in a steep fall in reported crime. Such overcrowded conditions are no doubt a factor in the increase of prison suicides. They reached a record 105 in 2002 and have continued to rise during the last year with a record number of 14 women prisoners committing suicide in 2003.

Under the Blair government, the number of prison sentences handed out to petty criminals has markedly increased. Hundreds of those currently in prison are there for failing to pay for a TV licence, speeding ticket or utility bill. Yet more categories of “criminals” were created under new legislation implemented by the government last year. It made begging a “recordable offence” in a White Paper entitled *Winning Back Our Communities*. Home Secretary David Blunkett said at the time, “We have been looking at ways of dealing with anti-social behaviour for some time.” He declared, “There is no need for anyone to beg in this country.”



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