

STORMING HELL

WISE COUNTY WORKERS AND RED ONION

After months of Red Onion prisoners on hunger strike, [especially politicized prisoner Kevin 'Rashid' Johnson](#), local resident Olajean Ray provides the following insight on what it's like living near two supermax prisons in Wise County, Virginia.

In the late 90s, I went to Red Onion State Prison on the Jack Rose Highway in Pound, Virginia. I would have been 6 or 7 years old, and this was a field trip at Wise Primary School for either kindergarten or first grade. Much to my surprise and disappointment, the facility we went to did not feature anybody in striped shirts knocking the bars with a metal cup or any wailing harmonica. (I was hoping to run into the Beagle Boys from *Ducktales*). There was nobody inside besides the guides, our teacher, and the 20-30 kids, walking through an empty prison and following like baby

ducks. It was a cold, barren facility: the steel of the doors, the clean chrome of fresh latrines. My feelings about the field trip receded to boredom as we got on the bus.

That's how it was with the prison: so omnipresent it was boring. At some point there were no prisons, then there was one, and then there was another: Wallens Ridge, another supermax with higher holding capacity, this time in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, at the opposite end of the county, cradling Wise County in prisons. With that, the total supermax capacity in Wise County was at 2,000 cells, and with those 2,000 cells came however many jobs, plenty of which were filled by [former miners](#), desperate for work after they were laid off from local coal companies.

Like all phenomena in the region, even the prison, as sure of a sign of the new economy in the Appalachian Virginias as any, could not fully escape the uncanny hegemony of coal. The prison was built on land donated by Pittston Coal, who retained rights for mineral extraction. Red Onion and Wallens Ridge were fascinating for the moment they were new, and then receded into collective memory. Being off the beaten path in Wise County was achievement enough already, but Red Onion becoming just another employer like Wal-Mart or Dominion Coal may have been its most uncanny triumph. Even the novelty of housing Lee Boyd Malvo, one of the two Beltway snipers, faded after a time.

This fading novelty aided Red Onion. If people didn't know of the human cost it takes to house 800 prisoners, it was because it wasn't discussed. In a region where the common notion prevails that welfare is a trick the lazy play on the government (of course, when they themselves apply for it, it's because they fell on hard times) and where a person's value is based on their work and what they provide, whatever horrors a prison guard might face are nothing compared to the horrors of judgment.

Whatever the effects of that might be on well-meaning guards is not the focus of this piece. Too often analysis in the imperial core softens itself by imagining the correct set of circumstances in which we can empathize with people who make reactionary choices. Witness the hubbub that arises any time the left tries to determine if veterans can contribute to struggle. Whatever the screws have to do to wash the stench of the repressive state off of them is better suited for a confession booth or their journals.

To understand Red Onion, we have to understand that prisons are not the same, and are differentiated by carceral functions. Red Onion State Prison is a supermax prison, which the best definition of was set by the jailors themselves in a state survey in 1996: a stand-alone unit or part of another facility and is designated for violent or disruptive inmates that typically involves up to 23- hour-per-day, single-cell confinement for an indefinite period of time, where prisoners are given minimal contact with people including staff and other inmates.

“Disruptive” is a key word here. The problem of prisons as we know it is an effective repression of class revolt during the long unrests in the 60s and 70, repressing active political radicals and making working class life an eternal subject of a parasitic carceral apparatus. Political repression through the prisons is not unique to this era--

ask Eugene Debs or anyone hemmed up on the Smith Act. However, there was an intensified focus on prisons from Black radicals because of the very facts of that *expansion*. As the Great Migration led to an influx of black laborers from the South, law and order policies became a popular way to coat racial anxieties. What Black radicals had to contend with was going from the Jim Crow South into a different kind of danger, and they had to provide answers as to why the danger of prisons were so, and why so many of their neighbors and friends were *specifically* winding up in these situations. In this category of black radicals, we have to include the prisoners: too often than not prisoners are viewed as mute beings choked by the facts of their conditions, but there was a reason the message resonated.

The prison riots of the 70s often get decoupled from the demands as a quirk of the age, an added feature to the general discontent of the times, but we should step back and discuss the relevance of the riots in places like Attica and Rikers. What black radicals captured fervently in prisons was the primacy of labor and the extraction of that labor, and its centrality in our society. The prisoner who screws legs on a desk for 99 cents an hour (if that) is supposedly doing so to have money for the commissary, for the phone calls, for their future. The date of release gets closer. The money feels like a disappointment. When they get out, time has passed. All the experience in the carceral system has evaporated. The things you learn in jail; in a world that can only offer you ways to pass time, knowing how to play Euchre is nothing. They can't put these things on a resume, and there's a strong chance their priors already disqualify them. What's left is a few jobs in the service sectors, paying poverty wages. If you don't get those, you can always resort to crime, risking going back to jail, and having to screw legs on a desk for 99 cents so your state colleges can seat the sons and daughters of arms dealers and used car lot salesman; ignorant they can ignore a lecture about "carceral capitalism" so comfortably because they have somewhere to sit. It is prison's most useful feature: the obfuscation of class relations and the entire schema of the mode of production by the labeling of workers as "prisoners", their work a scheme to teach them the values of a society that turns around and commits the robbery not only of their time, but of their value. If so much of prison is about "reform", why is it so easy to wind up back there after time is served? Is there not a greater punishment than knowing that the precious little time you have has been siphoned away so society can run? If prison is about reform, then why is so much of it spent being treated like something other than the human we *wish* to reform? Can a human being learn how not to hurt the world around them when, to take the testimony of Rashid Johnson, [they're given three showers a month?](#)

When those questions get asked, they continue getting the horrid treatment that sparked it. When they do anything, organize or try to exist in society the way any citizen does (I've been a Marxist of some variety since I read *The Communist Manifesto*, but I did it at a Panera without some hayseed beating the tires off of me), there is repression: violence, solitary, the continued degradation of prison life. And some of those prisoners

wind up in supermax facilities like Red Onion, if they cause enough trouble, where in the Appalachian mountains, the worst of the worst is hidden from American life, yet still somehow subjected to it (after all, the prison is still the prison of the the society that set it up). The declaration of Red Onion as “off the beaten path” isn’t something just to allay the anxieties of the locals, but a tacit admission that the prison is remote for everyone, to be barely seen. That took some buying off of the local workers by offering them a life-line when they were at their weakest, and it’s a continuous buying off while it operates unabated.

But why *should* it continue unabated? I would say this state of affairs, this charnel house in the mountains, is a continued insult to the region’s past of radical self-advocacy. Rather than harp on “Holy Appalachia” cliches of Appalachians who fall out of trees with fully formed politics or the gosh-darn-good-will to become less problematic, we have to understand labor unrest only getting to the point of bombings by the US government due to the worker’s integrality to American capital. Yet the workers themselves were not treated as integral. And that is why it all happened: the workers realized the value of what they did, how it was abrogate to their treatment, and when they made demands, capital deemed them too important to its workings to speak. And so: Baldwin-Felts then, and Red Onion’s prison guards now. Those guards are alienated subjects not only from themselves, but from the mission that can resolve that alienation once and for all.

Too long, the workers of the region have had to accept deals that give neither hair nor hide to the status of Appalachian workers. Coal mining is dangerous work. So is being a prison guard (not as dangerous as being a prisoner). At some point, Wise County workers are going to have to answer the question why these are the jobs we get, and they’re going to have to learn some hard lessons from Logan County, Morelos, and Saint Petersburg in the process.

Among other hard lessons that are going to have to be learned is simple: the prisoners in Red Onion State Prison aren’t locals, and most are black and hispanic. Kevin Rashid Johnson writes often of how:

The physical abuse is ever present. And it is targeted almost exclusively at Black prisoners, who, not coincidentally, make up the vast majority of the total population of the prison. A prison whose staff by contrast is almost totally white and drawn from the area’s segregated rural white communities. This demographic contradiction and cultural clash has ALWAYS served as a recipe for racist abuse at the remote prison, and its sister supermax Wallens Ridge State Prison (WRSP), which is located just a few miles away from ROSP.

“Demographic contradiction and cultural clash”. We are talking about a largely white populace (Appalachians) assisting a black population. There’s no point in the sort of masochistic skin flaying that constitutes most attempts for white people to assist with black issues, and there’s no reason to dance around that simple fact. But contradictions

exist to be resolved, and there's only one path that can do it. It will take the resolution of those contradictions through the efforts of *all* workers to create a new socialist society. If Marx said communism would obliterate the differentiation between town and country, then it should obliterate *all* obfuscations of labor, from imprisoned to free. Marx *also* said the self-organization of workers is the worker's task alone, but there's a great obstruction in the way. Why then shouldn't we throw ourselves at the very mechanisms that makes a prison-worker just a prisoner? Communism abolishes the present state of things. Even the sansculottes recognized the prison as not just imprisoning people. It also imprisons the society that builds it. At some point, the prison must be stormed, and all our agreements with death must be broken.