

## UNPRECEDENTED MEETING WITH LEGISLATURE IN MASSACHUSETTS STATE PRISON



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On Friday, October 23, 2015, a select group of prisoners known for their independence from the "system" met with a gathering of two (2) state senators, six (6) state representatives, and 12 (twelve) staff members and aides of other members of the General Court at which time the prisoners presented "positions" on various failures of the current criminal justice system while educating the legislators on the "truths" of prison life; which are not reflected in communications with prison officials. This event was unprecedented in nature, organized by the prisoners themselves working directly with the offices of Representative Benjamin Swan and Representative Thomas Sannicandro. At no time did the prisoners work with prison authorities as these same authorities had attempted to prohibit this long overdue meeting previously.

The prisoners gave presentations which covered such topics as the need for a compassionate medical release vehicle for prisoners in the state, strategies for the revitalization of the never-used commutation laws, ideas for presumptive parole, and the overwhelming attitude of hopelessness throughout the department of correction which creates the 47% recidivism rate here in the Commonwealth. The legislators were afforded a brief history lesson in Massachusetts rights and rehabilitation, many aspects of which were previously unknown to them, and how the voice of the prisoner has been missing from the equation for commonsense reform for far too long. Prison administrators who had attempted to derail the event had to sit by quietly while the presenters spoke truth to power.

One of the major suggestions the prisoner presenters made to the members of the General Court was that they need to again, as was done in the 1970's and 1980's, bring prisoners into the senate Chamber and House of Representatives to be questioned about how policy actually works inside the prison system. The men let the legislators know that it was their opinion the legislators had been listening "to the fox tell the story about the killing in the chicken coop" when they engage the department of correction about prison reform needs and ideas. These prison administrators adhere to the 1992 former Governor William Weld's mantra of "sending prisoners through the circles of hell" and "returning prisoners to the joy of breaking rocks". Those proven flawed and abusive concepts destroyed our prison system, giving us one of the highest staffing ratios and third highest pay rate in the country. The taxpayers of Massachusetts for decades have been afforded failed public safety efforts at an extraordinary cost; not only a financial cost but a tragic social cost as well.

Men here at the state prison, the modern gulag, took great pride in organizing this event. They take their civic duty seriously and this was fully grasped and commented upon by the legislators. This is only the beginning of the process of prisoner involvement; step two is being worked on at this time. Roundtable discussions will be held and ideas to move forward hatched. Real and effective change is coming and prisoners here in the Commonwealth will undoubtedly play a significant role. Men can, do, and will change in prison if they are involved in the process. This creates the hope which destroys the current hopelessness.

*agitate, disrupt, resist!*