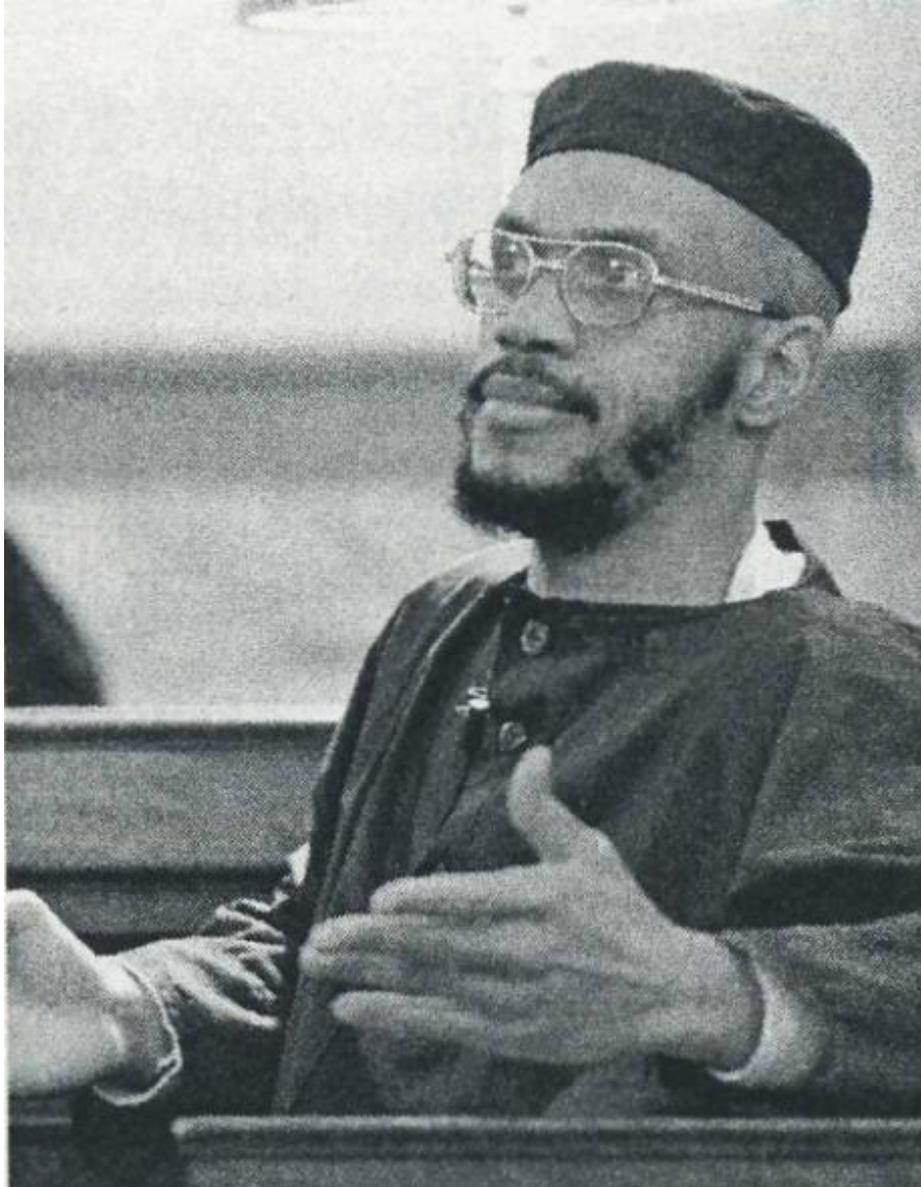


Overcoming racism: the Lucasville rebellion - Staughton Lynd



Interesting article looking at how black and white prisoners overcame racism through common struggle in the April 1993 prison rebellion in Lucasville, Ohio.

Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion about the racism of white workers. Unfortunately, little has been said or written about how white working-class racism can be overcome. In this essay, I examine a prison uprising in which black and white convicts struggled with racism and overcame it to a surprising degree.

George Skatzes and the Lucasville Rebellion

From April 11 to 21, 1993, what appears to have been the longest prison rebellion in United States history took place at the maximum security prison in Lucasville, in southern Ohio.[1](#) More than four hundred prisoners were involved. Nine prisoners and a guard were killed. After a negotiated surrender, five prisoners in the rebellion were sentenced to death.

The single most remarkable thing about the Lucasville rebellion is that white and black prisoners formed a common front against the authorities. When the State Highway Patrol came into the occupied cell block after the surrender, they found slogans written on the walls of the corridor and in the gymnasium that read: "Convict unity," "Convict race," "Black and whites together," "Blacks and whites, whites and blacks, unity," "Whites and blacks together," "Black and white unity."

The five prisoners from the rebellion on death row—the "Lucasville Five"—are a microcosm of the rebellion's united front. Three are black, two are white. Two of the blacks are Sunni Muslims. Both of the whites were, at the time of the rebellion, members of the Aryan Brotherhood.

My wife and I know the Lucasville Five and are assisting with the appeal of one of the white men, who has since repented his affiliation with the Aryan Brotherhood. What we have learned should give pause to anyone inclined to dismiss all members of a group like the Aryan Brotherhood as incurably racist. Let me give you a synopsis of the childhood of George Skatzes (pronounced "skates"), his experiences during the 1993 rebellion, and the way that his actions ran out ahead of his organizational affiliation and political vocabulary.

In Marion, Ohio, where George grew up, whites lived on one side of the tracks and blacks on the other. George and his sister, Jackie, were the children of their mother's third marriage. Their parents were divorced when George was an infant and he grew up in his mother's home, where a succession of her boyfriends passed through. The house was in perpetual disorder; George and Jackie were embarrassed by the clothes they wore to school and never invited school friends to their house. George was often beaten by his mother or one of his two older stepbrothers. When he became a young adult, he often tried to help his mother, once working overtime for five weeks and saving all his pay to buy her a freezer and refrigerator. But the gift was unappreciated.

George became aware that the neighbors considered his family to be "white trash." He felt more welcome on the black side of town than by the people next door. One of his best friends was the child of an interracial couple. "I might as well have been biracial myself," he recalls.

How could a person with these views have joined the Aryan Brotherhood at Lucasville? According to George, it was not because of an attitude of racial superiority. "You won't find anyone at Lucasville I judged because of the color of his skin," he insists, and the testimony of many black prisoners, both at trial and in private conversation with my wife and myself, supports this. "One race should not have to die for another to live," George Skatzes says. "We are all people."

Difficult as it may be for someone outside the walls to understand, George Skatzes states that he joined the Aryan Brotherhood because he perceived whites at Lucasville as a minority who needed to band together for self-protection. A majority of prisoners were black. The deputy warden, the warden, and the head of the statewide Department of Rehabilitation and Correction were black as well. On the one hand, all prisoners at Lucasville were oppressed. Conditions in the cell block used for administrative segregation were such that a petition was sent to Amnesty International and several prisoners cut off their pinky fingers and mailed them to the federal government. On the other hand, in Skatzes' experience, white prisoners like himself were punished for conduct that was condoned when committed by blacks.

Still insistent that these were the facts, Skatzes now says that joining the Aryan Brotherhood was "the biggest mistake of my life." In the course of responding to the day-by-day events of the rebellion, he found himself speaking not for white prisoners or for those white prisoners who belonged to the Aryan Brotherhood, but for the entire inmate body.

The disturbance at Lucasville was triggered by an attempt to force prisoners to submit to tuberculosis testing, by means of a substance containing alcohol injected under the skin. A number of Muslims said that receiving the injection was contrary to their religious beliefs, and suggested alternative means of testing. The warden responded that he was running the prison. He made plans to lock down the prison on the day after Easter and, if necessary, to force all prisoners to be injected. These plans became common knowledge. Accordingly, on the afternoon of Easter Sunday, prisoners returning from recreation on the yard overpowered a number of guards and took them hostage, occupying the L block of the prison.

During the next several hours, black prisoners killed five white prisoners believed to be snitches. A race war, like the one during the Santa Fe prison riot a few years earlier, seemed imminent.

At this point, two Muslims approached George Skatzes. George had not taken part in planning the rebellion. He celled in L block and had stayed there when the riot began, in order to protect his property and to look after his friends. The black men who spoke to Skatzes were aware that, as a physically imposing older convict (in his late forties), "Big George" had often been asked to mediate disputes among prisoners. Siddique Abdullah Hasan and Cecil Allen told Skatzes that whites and blacks had gathered on different sides of the gymnasium and the atmosphere was very tense. They asked "Big George" to help them ensure that the protest would be directed against the prison administration, their common oppressor.

Skatzes agreed. He went to the gym and spoke to both the blacks and whites. He put his arm around the shoulders of a black man and said, "If they come in here, they're going to kill us no matter what color we are." He appealed to members of each group to mix with members of the other group.

The next day, April 12, George Skatzes (with a megaphone) and Cecil Allen (carrying a huge white flag of truce) went out on the yard to try to start negotiations. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, April 13 through 15, Skatzes was the principal telephone negotiator for the prisoners. He took part in meetings of a leadership council representing the three main organized groups in L block: the Muslims, members of the Aryan Brotherhood (ABs), and the Black Gangster Disciples. On the afternoon and evening of Thursday, April 15, he negotiated the release of a hostage guard who was experiencing extreme emotional trauma, accompanied Officer Clark into the yard, and released him to the authorities. He made a radio address in which he said: "We are a unit here. They try to make this a racial issue [but] it is not a racial issue. Black and white alike have joined hands at [Lucasville] and have become one strong unit."

You see the point. The things that Skatzes *did*, in calming racial antagonisms, in working cooperatively with blacks, in characterizing the rebellion publicly as the work of "one strong unit," both black and white, hardly expressed the worldview of the Aryan Brotherhood. In part, Skatzes' actions expressed his personal decency; they also responded to a practical situation that called for racial cooperation. Experience ran ahead of ideology. Actions spoke louder than organizational labels.

George Skatzes and the black prisoners among the Lucasville Five stand in solidarity publicly and struggle privately to understand each other. During a fast that they undertook together, their list of demands, drafted by one of the blacks in the group, began with a concern for proper medical treatment for Skatzes. At the super-maximum-security prison in Youngstown where the Five are now housed, a number of prisoners began another fast. After about a week, only Skatzes and Siddique Abdullah Hasan were still going without food. The prison approached each one with assurances that their complaints would be addressed. Each refused

to break his fast until told directly by the other that he was ready to eat again. Hasan wrote to me: "I chose to stay on the fast to let them know that I was down with George's struggle, too, and I would not sit quiet and allow the system to mess over him . . . [T]hey got the message and know that we are one."

From Prison Resistance to Class Struggle

How, if at all, can this experience of prisoners overcoming racism be extrapolated? What is the relationship of prison resistance to the wider movement for social change?

A good deal of the recent writing about racism calls on white workers to give up "white-skin privilege" voluntarily in order to become legitimate participants in the class struggle. Such a voluntaristic approach to racism is unsatisfactory for exactly the same reason that Marx and Engels found Utopian Socialism to be inadequate. Workers do not become socialists because agitators have gone house to house preaching the virtues of common ownership. Workers become socialists in action, through experience. Thus, Eugene Debs first recognized the need for the broadest possible unity of the working class in economic struggle and founded the American Railway Union to take the place of the separate unions of the railway crafts. Then, after the Pullman strike, Debs came to understand that in a capitalist society, government will always intervene in the economic class struggle on behalf of the capitalist class, and helped to organize the Socialist Party.²

Racism, too, will be transformed through experience and struggle. We should anticipate that the objective contradictions of capitalism will again and again call on workers somehow to set aside their antagonisms toward one another, so that they can effectively act together against the common oppressor. As workers' *actions* change in response to the need for a solidarity in which the survival of each depends on the survival of all, *attitudes* will change also.

There are at least two obvious differences between resistance in prisons and forms of struggle outside the walls. First, a prison is a total environment. Black and white workers in the larger society typically leave behind the integrated workplace setting when they punch out, returning to segregated living situations in the community. Inside a prison, blacks and whites must survive in one another's company twenty-four hours a day.

Second, anything good inside a prison must ordinarily be brought about by the prisoners themselves, from below, through self-organization. In this respect, prisons differ from the military. Like prisons, the military is a total institution, but in the military, desirable social change can come from above, and *did* come from above, when the Armed Forces were integrated after the Second World War.

I know another George—George Sullivan, a truck driver from Gary, Indiana—whose experience illustrates the effectiveness of the equal status contract imposed from above in the Armed Forces. George Sullivan grew up in southern Illinois, the same racist setting recalled by David Roediger in the opening pages of *The Wages of Whiteness*.³ George Sullivan describes the racism he absorbed as a child:

There never was any question in my mind that niggers weren't any good. I knew that, but it didn't necessarily mean they were bad people because everyone knew that a nigger's a coward and he won't cause you any trouble. There weren't any around where I lived.

One did come to the house one time, scared me to death. I saw him at the door, there he was, and I didn't know what to do. Any time we would be doing something wrong, one of the comments my mother would make was, "I'll have some big nigger come and get you if you don't stop that." So I went to the door and there was this big nigger. I just knew that he had come after me. But that's the only association I had. I wasn't taught to hate them. It was like

the feeling about animals. Their place is not in the house or it's not where you are. Animals live in the woods. Niggers live somewhere else⁴.

George Sullivan's relationship with blacks changed when he went into the military. The new policy of integration had just gone into effect. George reported to a barracks where he found that he was the only white. After informing the sergeant that there had been a mistake, he was told, "No, we've been having some problems about not integrating enough. As new white guys come on the base they're going to be put in there. You just happen to be the first." Then this happened:

I was a meat-cutter and I got a bit careless. I cut three or four of my fingers. I had them all bandaged up. I had just been promoted to sergeant but I still had my corporal stripes. I was sitting out in front of the barracks and the sergeant came by and he said, "Sullivan, get your stripes on." "I can't sew with one hand," I said, "and I don't have any money to take them over to the PX." He said, "You'll have stripes on your uniform by tomorrow or we'll take the stripes away from you."

I was sitting there by myself just wondering what to do. One of the guys in the barracks who'd heard it, he came out and said, "Have you already got your stripes?" I said, "Yeah, I bought them already." He said, "Well, if you'll go get them I'll sew them on for you." So that was the first thing that really broke the ice. He sat and sewed those stripes on my uniform while we got to know each other.⁵

Neither George Skatzes nor George Sullivan were, or are, ideological radicals. But they are white workers who have substantially overcome the racism that surrounded them. Both learned through their experience to deal with people as individuals rather than to judge them by the color of their skin.

We need a synthesis of the pressure for social change illustrated by the military policy of integration, with working-class self-emancipation. Prison resistance begins to suggest such a synthesis. There, the common need to survive creates the pressure to cooperate. But prison administrators will not organize that cooperation from above. In fact, prison administrators do all that they can to forbid and break up self-organization by prisoners. Therefore, black and white prisoners must depend on themselves to build solidarity with each other.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the self-organized protest movement of blacks created a model for students, women, workers, and eventually, soldiers. In the same way, the self-organized resistance of black and white prisoners can become a model for the rest of us in overcoming racism. Life will continue to ask of working people that they find their way to solidarity. Surely, there are sufficient instances of deep attitudinal change on the part of white workers to persuade us that a multi-ethnic class consciousness is not only necessary, but also possible.

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- ¹ I have written about the Lucasville rebellion in "Black and White and Dead All Over: The Lucasville Insurrection," *Race Traitor*, no. 8 (Winter 1998); "Lessons from Lucasville," *The Catholic Worker*, vol. LXV, no. 7 (December 1998); "The Lucasville Trials," *Prison Legal News*, vol. 10, no. 6 (June 1999). I have also written a docudrama entitled "Big George," a play about the rebellion in two acts and twelve scenes, in which the dialogue is drawn entirely from words actually spoken. Those who would like a copy can send a check for \$7.50, made out to me, to 1694 Timbers Court, Niles, OH 44446.
- ² libcom note: we could also add to this that since experiencing socialist governments, and seeing how they continue to intervene in class struggle on behalf of the employers, many revolutionaries learned that government itself is inherently

opposed to the working class, and that workers must trust only in their own power and initiative rather than political parties which seek to take over state power.

- [3.](#) David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 3-5.
- [4.](#) George Sullivan, "Working for Survival," in *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), p. 202.
- [5.](#) *ibid.*