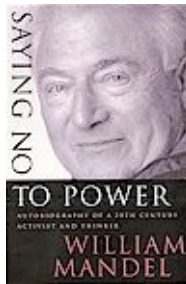


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BILL MANDEL on LARRY PINKNEY

See also [Larry Pinkney on Bill](#).

The following is an excerpt from Bill Mandel's autobiography, **SAYING NO TO POWER**, published in 1999. The excerpt is from pages 500-504.



For four solid years, while I was researching and writing *Soviet But Not Russian*, my primary social activism was on behalf of prisoners. The credit is due them, for it was initiated by their letters stimulated by my broadcasts and sometimes deeply involving KPFA as a station.

Further conflict between me and the News Department arose out of my efforts for Larry Pinkney, a former Black Panther. His militancy started with his experiences as the only

African-American student in a Maryland High School of three

thousand, which had Ku Klux Klan agitators. Years later, Pinkney had been appointed by San Francisco Mayor [Joseph] Alioto, under pressure from segments of the Black, white, and Chicano communities, to the Civil Service Commission oral board interviewing candidates for the Fire Department. He had been the only Black member, the only civilian, the youngest. Having lost the key to an apartment available to him, he tried to get in through a window. Police, tailing him, said as they seized him: "We have you now, nigger!" and beat him badly. He was convicted of burglary under the illegal-entry clause of the penal code.

Pinkney wrote me early in 1983, when completing in Vacaville a nine-year term that began in Canada. He is best described in a "To Whom It May Concern" letter about him from a member of the Canadian Parliament from the Conservative Party. Canada had cooperated with the U.S. desire to imprison Larry after he fled this country subsequent to that frame-up in 1973. It was only after the UN Human Rights Committee officially condemned the actions of the Canadian government in his case that he was transferred to imprisonment in the U.S. in his seventh year of incarceration, instead of being released. The Canadian M.P. wrote:

"I am our Party's spokesman on issues relating to Correction and Parole... I became acquainted with Mr. Larry Pinkney... I was quickly impressed with the high level of personal integrity which he displayed. He was not looking for any favours, he was not enumerating an inventory of complaints or alibis. In short, there was no evidence that he had ever become a part of the criminal sub-culture which makes up so much a part of our prison population... I have... found... him... meticulously honorable. My experience with him is that his word is his bond."

I sent him poems I had written in the early '50s, primarily about Black freedom struggles I had participated in. He wrote: "They made me feel love, but most of all, your poems make me feel hope. Your poem, 'For My Children, To Dr. DuBois,' is my favorite. Its strength lies in its combined gentleness and searing truthfulness; so powerful, yet so gentle."

...A year after we became acquainted, [Pinkney] was framed for allegedly trying to start a riot in prison. None had occurred. In fact -- I had been kept informed of the situation as it developed in the previous week -- he was trying to stop one from developing. When I told Bari Scott, the African-American woman who headed KPFA's Third World Department, about the situation, she contacted U.S. Senator Cranston's and Congressman Dellums' offices. I wrote the Vacaville warden and the head of the state prison system essentially identical letters:

"I intend to broadcast on this matter..., " of course in my Soviet program time, "and to ask listeners to write you... I visited Mr. Pinkney last Monday. Mr. Pinkney was greatly troubled by events earlier that day. He had taken the lead in calming the situation, which required approximately four group meetings in the course of the day. He was proud of the fact that he enjoyed the confidence of white and Chicano inmates as well as Black, and that this had made it possible to cool the situation... The removal of peacemakers looks to me like a great way to guarantee a riot next time racial friction occurs. Is that what the authorities desire?"

I described the situation to the News Director, who didn't cover it. When I asked why, she replied that it had "slipped her mind." So I went to the African American woman heading the Third World Department, who contacted the (independent) KPFA Saturday News. They phoned me and broadcast a good story, ending with a request for communications to the authorities. On my own show, on which I gave the case five minutes at the start and two at the end, I got numerous phone calls from people who wanted to write.

Eight days after I informed the News Director of the situation, she could no longer resist the pressure, accepted a call from Larry, and broadcast it on the 6 p.m. news. I wrote him: "Everyone commented on your articulateness."

Representative Dellums wrote the Vacaville warden protesting the violation of state-wide prison rules in the Pinkney case, and saying that U.S. Senator Cranston and a state senator had also had their mail to Pinkney opened. This stimulated a "To Whom It May Concern" letter from the public information department of the prison system saying they got "a large number of similar letters and postcards regarding the situation of Larry Pinkney. Correspondents apparently learned of Mr. Pinkney's situation via a radio broadcast." Pinkney wrote me: "The reason I was found not guilty was not due to my firm presentation or even the witnesses in my defense. I was found not guilty due to the strong support from you, your listeners, and other listeners to KPFA who contacted the Calif. Dept. of Corrections [CDC]."

...Early 1984 saw the wrap-up of my controversy with KPFA News over its handling of Pinkney. At a staff meeting, I said that the News Director's failure to deal for eight days with the story that prison authorities were trying to discipline him for what was actually his role in preventing a riot was an act of racism. In a memo written for circulation within Pacifica, I wrote:

"I do not believe that [the News Director] believes in slavery, lynching, segregation, or discrimination. However, in a country in which the latter two are prevalent realities, plus regular police murder of Blacks, including young children, special sensitivity is demanded in any story where Blacks are involved, particularly in a situation in which the victim has a history of political militancy... Failure to act with such sensitivity is racist. I cannot avoid the conclusion that the very bad relationship between [the News Director] and myself over my 4 1/2 years of criticism of the News Department's handling of Soviet matters played a role in her not acting on the story."

For anyone with any doubt about why militant activists like Pinkney wound up in prison, the following excerpt from his FBI file, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, speaks for itself: "Pinkney is potentially dangerous due to his

demonstrated ability to unify black and white. His associates are Negro, White, and Chinese. **Special attention is being given to neutralizing him.** The areas of sex and drugs appear to be the most effective ones to utilize. His habits in these areas are unknown, but are being monitored with this objective. The FBI is working in conjunction with [blacked out, but a covering note to the U.S. Secret Service, San Francisco, accompanies this]."

Pinkney asked me to pick him up on his release. His parents lived in Washington, D.C., and he had a sister in the Northwest. *"There are very few people indeed that I would want to be anywhere near on that day," he wrote me, "as I doubt strongly that they would or could conceive of what it means to me, what I have been through, or my psychological state of mind. With you however, there is no doubt that you know all these things far more poignantly than most people could ever know or hope to know."*

Larry's indomitable spirit had come through most strongly in a letter to me describing a most unusual event behind prison walls:

"When I heard that you were going to play that [HUAC hearing] recording, I did something that I have never done before [in over nine years behind bars]. I rounded up all the prisoners in my dorm and requested that they listen to it, which they did. They were elated hearing you do battle; and afterwards, there were many questions to me from the prisoners (both black and white) about what they had heard. They all clearly got the drift of what you were saying before HUAC, though they asked me to explain some of the words that you used after they heard it... They were cheering you on (something that utterly amazed me)... A couple of the prisoners are adamantly anti-communist; but even they were cheering you on... You got across even to people who have virtually no political astuteness at all."

