

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Conditions on "A" Wing, Armagh Gaol

On Feb. 7th male screws stormed onto B Wing Armagh Gaol which was then the wing that houses us 32 female prisoners on protest for political status. During this raid many of the girls were severely beaten by male screws. We were locked in our cells, refused access to toilets and washing facilities by both male and female screws. They told us to use the plastic chamber pots in the cells for all bodily functions. We had no other choice but to do as they said. We used the pots in our cells. When they were full we had nowhere to empty them. Still we were refused access to toilets and to ensure this continued, the toilets were locked so we could not use them while going on the hour's exercise. The result being we had to empty the pots out the windows. We were shocked at the attitude of the Prison administration, first with the arrival of male screws and next denying us toilet and washing facilities. Out of this developed the situation now present in Armagh Gaol - the no-wash protest. We had no alternative, the screws had the key to the toilets, we had not!

On Feb. 13th we were informed that we were to be moved to another part of the prison, namely "A" Wing. We were told to pack all our belongings and to be prepared for the move. Each girl was escorted separately to a cell, where she was bodily searched by two female screws, all items of personal property were taken from her. We could bring nothing to "A" Wing, each girl was escorted to "A" Wing, one at a time, with nothing, only the clothes she stood in. That evening Cardinal O Fiaich came in as our Prison Chaplain had been refused entry to the jail. We complained to the Cardinal of our ill-treatment, the conditions and the fact that we'd not been allowed any of our personal property, including our prayers and Rosary beads. Later that night we received our Prayers and Rosary beads, nothing else. Within a week we were given each a few items of personal property -: comb, toothbrush and a few photos of relatives. It is six weeks now since we were forced into the no-wash protest, six weeks since we last washed, six weeks since we have changed our clothing, yes we still wear the same clothes that we walked onto A Wing, Feb. 13th. For six weeks we have lay in these cells surrounded by urine, excrement and used sanitary towels.

There are 32 here on A Wing, all protesters. A Wing has two floors, we protesters occupy the bottom floor on Al Wing, with two girls to a cell. Each cell measures 8' X 12' approx. with two beds. At first we were supplied with a table, chair and locker but these have since been removed by screws. We also have two chamber pots, plastic mugs, and plastic knives and forks. The cells are filthy, excrement covers the walls, the floors are no longer visible through the lumps of fluff, dust, and dirt. The stench of urine and excrement clings to the cells and our bodies. No longer can we empty the pots of urine and excrement out the windows, as the male screws have boarded them up. Little light or air penetrates the thick boarding. The electric light has to be kept on constantly in the cells, the other option is to sit in the dark. Regardless of day or night, the cells are dark. Now we can't even see out the windows, our only view is the walls of excreta. The spy holes in the doors are locked so they can only be opened by screws to look in. For 23 hours a day we lie in these cells, we have one hour's exercise each day.

Obviously our bodies are also in a bad condition. Not having washed or had a change of clothing for six weeks, we are covered in dirt. The clothes hang on us. We're becoming accustomed to the smell but I doubt if the clothes will take much more. They are already falling apart with dirt and handling by screws. Our hair is dull, the grease now drying in thickly to our scalps, as each day passes, it becomes more difficult to comb through it as the dust and dirt cause the hair to matt. Our skin is a grey colour, different parts of our body blacker than the rest. The smell of body odour mixes with the strong stench of urine and excrement but as I say, we hardly notice it now. Since six weeks have passed, we have all gone through our menstrual cycle on the no-wash protest. It is a dangerous time, the risk of infection being very high. The sanitary towels are thrown into us without wrappings, we are not permitted paper bags or such like, so they lie in the dirt until used. We have nowhere to dispose of them when used. The loss of weight is another major problem. Many of the girls have lost over an half stone since the no-wash protest. This is due to the poor quality and quantity of the prison food. We receive no food parcels as they are privileges we lose for being

on the protest. The food is brought onto the Wing and each girl is unlocked one at a time to collect their food from the screws. This is a very slow process and usually an hour elapses between the first girl and the last is served. If you are the first unlocked the food is still warm even though the screws have left the food sitting for 15 minutes or so before they start to distribute it and then the portions are so small. The last girls suffer the most as by then the food is freezing, stuck to the plate with the hard cold grease but we either eat it or starve. So we ignore the condition of the meal and swallow it because the next meal is hours away and perhaps next time round you'll be luckier to be amongst the first to receive it, when it's still warmish. We have complained to many people concerning the food - the Governor, Prison Doctor, the Board of Visitors and even the Cardinal but still the food is cold and the amount small.

We receive one hour's exercise a day, for one hour of every day we get out into the yard, away from the stinking cells. We are not all out at the one time, sixteen of us are out between 1.00-2.00 p.m., the next are out between 5.00-6.00 p.m. They unlock us one at a time to go to the yard. We're freezing by the time the hours has passed but it's worth it, rain, hail or snow we're out in it, believe me that fresh air is worth catching pneumonia for. During our hour in the yard the cells are raided by screws, when we return we usually find some furniture removed, tables, chairs and lockers, there's not much else they can take. Recently they removed our sheets and pillowcases, they left our blankets but knows, they could be gone tomorrow. Most of us empty our chambers on the wing when going to exercise, for if not, you only return to find the pot and its contents kicked around the floor of the cell.

The Prison Doctor visits the cells on some mornings and asks us as we lie amongst the urine and excreta if we have any complaints. We used to mention the food but it does no good, so why complain, after all he is part of the Prison system who has us in these conditions. The rest of the medical staff are seldom seen, some of them cannot stand the stench of the cells so they refuse to enter them. Others do, but it is difficult to contact them as we have to rely on screws for that and they don't bother to relay the messages.

The Governor, we never see, although we know he sometimes inspects the cells when we are at exercise. The only time each of us see him is at the beginning of each month when we are put on report for refusing to do prison work. The Governor arrives in the cell to carry out the adjudication and informs each one of us individually that we have lost all privileges for the month, such as: loss of remission for month, loss of all visits and food parcels for the months, loss of association at weekends, loss of film shows for the month. There is nothing left for him to take, this adjudication is carried out every month. We receive one statutory visit per month, he cannot take it from us but he can make it unbearable.

The visit each month is the only time we see our relatives but since the no-wash protest it has become increasingly difficult to obtain what little privacy we had. Now all us protesters have to take our visits in a small confined area, this small room holds three tables for three prisoners and visitors and another table for screws. There is not enough space for more than three protesters to have visits at the due time. Screws listen into the conversation and make snide remarks throughout this monthly half-hour with relatives. On many occasions screws have interrupted our visits if we mention our conditions. Other screws have warned the visitors if they do not move immediately the visit is over they will be forcibly removed and not permitted back to the prison. Visitors or protesters have never given any reason for screws to take such action during visits. One can only interpret this as an overall hardening of attitudes by screws not with protesters alone but also with relatives. No visitors may bring cigarettes in on the visit, the visitor must finish the cigarette before entering the visiting room. This is to ensure none of us protesters receive a cigarette.

Since the outcry of the male screws storming into B Wing on Feb. 7th, only female screws can be seen here on A1 Wing, but we can hear the male screws on the landing above us, which is A2. When the food arrives on the wing, female screws shout to the male screws "to get in out of the road" until the food is served.

Invariably mistakes occur and male screws have been spotted by many of us as we return from visits. The female screws become very agitated when they realise we have seen the male screws as they quickly disappear into cells on A2. No prisoners now occupy A2, although male prisoners who have been brought up from Crumlin Rd. jail to clean the wing, remain on this landing all day and return to another part of the prison at night to sleep. After the male prisoners clad in overalls and gloves clean the wing, they then wash the plastic plates which we receive our meals on. They wash these wearing the same gloves they use to clean up the urine. The female screws who work on the wing are supplied with special overalls, boots, gloves and masks. At the beginning the masks weren't put to much use but now its seldom a screw is seen without one. Before the no-wash relationships between screws and girls was bearable, there were minor incidents but beatings did not exist. Now there has been major change, if a girl stakes too long to collect her meal or stops to speak through a door to a comrade, she will be dragged back to her cell by a number of female screws. After such episodes the girl involved ends up charged with assaulting screws! If there has been any resistance shown by the girl a female screw will run to the Guardroom to press the bell that has been specially installed to summon assistance of male screws. When we leave the cells to collect food or for exercise, we are continually subjected to a tirade of abuse, screaming and bawling at us to "hurry up or no more are getting out for their meal". They interfere with our food (some screws put salt in our cornflakes), continually harassing us from the minute they set eyes on us until we're locked back in our cells. Even then they don't stop, at night they sometimes hose down the wing (depending on how dirty it is) and the hose is pressed up to the doors spraying of water on us. Every day conditions worsen, and every day the screws continue their harassment, six weeks have gone, our comrades in H-Block, with only a blanket have suffered it for years, how much longer will it be allowed to continue?