

TOWN HALL MEETING

by

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The name "Town Hall Meeting" is very popular in North Carolina, where I am imprisoned, but I've never quite figured it out. It is a meeting between two or more people, but that doesn't mean that they will vote on any issue or attempt to resolve any problem. It is usually not held in a town hall, and never bears any resemblance to a town meeting.

It appears that anyone can schedule a get-together and use the phrase "Town Hall Meeting." Cities and school boards do it. So do other municipalities and agencies. Churches, P.T.A.'s and other civic organizations do it.

The terminology seems to be absolutely politically correct. "Town Hall Meeting" has tremendous spin value. When street gangs congregate, loiter, rout (look that one up in your Funk and Wagnall's) in their 'hoods, they

are harassed and treated like security threat groups. Why don't they post notices of Town Hall Meeting gatherings? I'm just an ol' country boy from Massachusetts, but I reckon if a group of young people called for a Town Hall Meeting meeting in one of their back yards, it would be well received by the community.

Whatever a Town Hall Meeting event is, North Carolina prison units are supposed to have them periodically - at least monthly. Here in the Blue unit of Tabor Correctional Institution, notices of a Town Hall Meeting meeting are posted about 9 or 10 times a year. Usually, they're taken down an hour or two later with nothing more being said.

On November 21, 2014, we actually had Town Hall Meeting meetings. Sgt. Hardie conducted them in the office of Mr. Collins, one of the assistant unit managers. Mr. Collins played with his computer and occasionally said "Move on."

Such meetings used to be organized on the unit level. A non-resident staff member would address twelve

prisoners (2 from each cell block) in the dining hall. We would be allowed to ask questions and mention unit concerns ("no personal concerns"). The non-resident staff person would say "Per policy" and remind us who was the boss. If he detected signs of prisoner unity, he would say "This meeting is over," and we would be returned to our cell blocks.

There is strength in numbers. Prisoner unity is not a big problem here at T.C.I., but there are a handful of us who occasionally manage to stir things up a little. Insecure officers on salary like to deal with isolated prisoners, preferring 2 on 1 or 2 on 2 odds rather than 1 on 12; so Town Hall Meeting meetings are now usually conducted one block at a time. Last week, there were four men in Cory Collins' office, including a teacher's assistant and myself representing C block.

The meeting notice had ~~included~~ spaces been posted the week before. The advertised date had come and gone, so the summons to a meeting on the 21st had taken us somewhat by surprise.

The announcement had included spaces for two prisoner names (where the TA and I had signed up as usual) and several lines for questions and comments. The TA had mentioned guards neglecting their posts and other situations we wanted documented but not necessarily addressed. I had mentioned sanitation concerns that had arisen when the unit manager, himself a rather filthy and slovenly individual, had declared the main shower areas off-limits to prisoners who are assigned to cells on the bottom floor.

We prisoners stood respectfully while Sgt. Hardie sat in a lavishly upholstered chair and answered our questions. He said he couldn't speak for all rotations, but he assured us that his men "do everything per policy." Mr. Collins could have spoken for all rotations but he was playing with his computer, as usual. Once in a while he would look up, appearing mildly annoyed, and say "Move on."

It did not appear that anything had been accomplished.

When we got back to the block, a guard told me to return to Mr. Collins' office. He wanted to discuss a pending disciplinary appeal. My conviction of being in an unspecified "unauthorized location" had been related to the A.D.A. violation (our characterization, not management's) that had been briefly discussed at the Town Hall Meeting meeting. Collins had made no effort to address the issue in the proper forum. He chose, rather, to get me alone with him and the sergeant and try to intimidate me.

I am a political prisoner. Please don't ever call me an inmate. I'm a journalist and I correspond with people around the world. Some of the guards hate me because I frequently speak out about the prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, and human and civil rights abuses in American prisons and jails.

On Friday evening, September 27, 2014, an upstairs neighbor from my home city gave me a soup. I met him at the top of the stairs and carried it down to the TV area. A deservedly unpopular guard approached

me and said "You can't go up those stairs." That was a silly statement, as I'd just done so and come down again, despite my painful disability, and had violated no existing rule; but I didn't argue with him.

The following week, I was informed that the guard had written me up. "Secret indictments" are illegal, but commonly employed in T.C.I. I had been convicted without an evidentiary hearing (also illegal) even though the D.H.O. couldn't or wouldn't tell me what "unauthorized location" I was accused of being in.

Mr. Collins obviously wanted a confession of guilt. I'm sure he'd have been happy with any incriminating statement he could have obtained by coercion and treachery. He tried to harass me and provoke a loud response or angry gesture so he could lock me up, even if only for a "cooling off period." I stood my ground as a gentleman (that always puzzles and infuriates him), denying any wrongdoing and saying "No, Sir" in a clear droning monotone.

Mr. Collins showed me some highly classified information on his computer. Perhaps he should have expended more time and effort preparing for his unauthorized interrogation of this former trial attorney. The security information he disclosed may be very valuable to me someday, but it didn't help him much, as it directly contradicted the guard's "disciplinary" report.

Through it all, Collins believed he was conducting a coercive interrogation, and that I was the one being interrogated. I don't understand "Town Hall Meeting," but I know that by the time the assistant unit manager dismissed me, he was manifestly frustrated, agitated and angry. I was not.

When I got back to the block, a large cadre of guards strip searched me. Taking full advantage of my age and disability, they made me stand in the cold day room over half an hour in handcuffs but without adequate clothing while some of them "searched" my cell. They left me with a terrible mess, violating several published D.A.C. policies, to say the least.

One of my neighbors said he didn't know why I participate in Town Hall Meeting activities orchestrated by our oppressors. "Why did you go?" he asked. "You knew what was going to happen!" I appreciated the compliment.

"Yes" I said contemplatively. I paused and reflected for a few seconds on a long and stressful evening. It did appear that I had got some powerful people upset. I smiled briefly, just a little old convict's grin. "That's why I went."

Yankee Lawyer 12-01-2014

Note

1. N.C. Department of Public Safety,
Division of Adult Correction