

Pennsylvania death row inmates conduct hunger strike

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Forty-five death row inmates at SCI Greene, the Pennsylvania prison where political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal is incarcerated, halted a hunger strike on Thursday, September 21 as the condition for a beginning of talks with prison authorities over their grievances.

The hunger strike began on August 29 in the death row section of the prison. Prisoners initiated the strike to protest prison authorities' plans to introduce a new set of regulations to increase their control over prisoners' lives. The last straw for the inmates were proposed regulations to strip search all prisoners—including body cavity invasions—each time they went in or out of their cells, and a plan to keep lights on in the men's cells 24 hours a day.

Two days after the hunger strike began, the new regulations were introduced throughout the R.H.U., the restricted area of the prison, excluding death row. While the strip searches, body cavity invasions and the 24-hour cell lights were not implemented against the death row prisoners, they decided to continue the hunger strike against harassment and their general treatment. The inmates drew up a list of grievances for the new unit manager who had just been brought in to run the death row. The main grievances included the demand for better medical care and more hygienically prepared food.

The strike, which involved about a third of the men on death row, was observed by many inmates by refusing to eat the prison food served on trays, but eating snacks they could purchase on their own. To increase pressure on the strikers guards began confiscating the inmates' snack foods, and the prison sent a medical officer around to check daily on every hunger striker. The prison charged striking inmates two dollars for each of these visits. This is an unaffordable

economic burden for most inmates since most of them come from the poorest sections of society, and they are paid the abysmal rate of 14 cents an hour for their prison labor.

At this time, negotiations between the death row hunger strikers and prison authorities are continuing. While Mumia Abu-Jamal did not join this hunger strike, he expressed his support for the strikers saying, "Men on death row take their lives very seriously." Mumia did participate in a hunger strike in 1998 initiated in response to a raid by prison officers during which guards confiscated most of the inmates' personal belongings, including legal papers. The raid by prison officials was in retaliation for a court ruling won by inmates charging that there were repressive prison conditions at the Greene County facility.

Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther and outspoken radio journalist, was found guilty in the 1981 shooting death of a Philadelphia police officer. He is currently awaiting a ruling on his habeas corpus appeal that was filed in federal court last October. Mumia's lawyers have presented 29 claims for relief on the grounds that he did not receive a fair trial.

Mumia was scheduled to die last December, but US District Judge William H. Yohn Jr. issued a stay of execution as he reviewed his appeal. Yohn has yet to rule if he will hold new evidentiary hearings as is being sought by the defense or will rule on the appeal based on the current records of Mumia's trial and appeals.

With 235 inmates on death row, most at the Greene county prison, Pennsylvania has the fourth highest number of prisoners on death row in the country. California has the highest number with 576 condemned inmates, Texas is second with 455, and Florida third with 391. Since reinstating the death penalty three people have been executed in Pennsylvania.



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