US: Georgia prison inmates strike

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Inmates at seven Georgia state prisons called a strike on December 9 to protest against unpaid labor practices, poor conditions, and violations of basic human rights.

Thousands of prisoners participated in the protest by refusing to work and remaining in their cells. Prisoners coordinated the action using contraband cell phones. Black, white, and Latino inmates are unified in the strike, a significant development considering the brutal and fractious racial culture within US prisons.

In a press release, the prisoners listed foremost among their demands a wage for their work. Inmates under the state's Department of Corrections (DOC) are forced to work without pay.

Prisoners are demanding access to educational opportunities beyond General Equivalency Diploma (GED) certification, improved living conditions, access to medical care, fruit and vegetables in their meals, family visitation and telephone communication rights, just parole decisions, and an end to cruel and unusual punishments.

Initially planned as a one-day protest on Thursday, prisoners extended the strike into Friday and the weekend when the DOC responded with violence. Prisoners at the Augusta State Prison said at least six inmates were forcibly removed from their cells by guards and beaten. Several men suffered broken ribs and, according to a press release, prisoners said another was beaten "beyond recognition."

Guards at the Telfair prison destroyed personal property of prisoners. At Macon State, the warden ordered the shutoff of both heat and hot water as temperatures dipped below freezing. Some Macon prisoners were dragged into solitary confinement cells in "the hole."

The DOC has denied that prisoners are engaging in coordinated action, but placed four facilities under an indefinite lockdown beginning Thursday. Speaking to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* December 9, DOC spokesperson Peggy Chapman claimed that the protests were "a rumor." "There's nothing really going on," she told the paper. "Inmates are working … [except at] the prisons we put on lockdown. I think that [the protest] was the plan but I don't think it's come to fruition."

However, numerous inmates contacted the *New York Times* on banned cell phones to speak on the strike. "We're hearing in the news they're putting it down as we're starting a riot, so they locked all the prison down," a 20-year-old Hays State inmate said, adding, "We locked ourselves down… We committed the crime, we're here for a reason. But at the same time, we're men. We can't be treated like animals."

"We're not coming out until something is done," another unnamed prisoner at Rogers State Prison declared. "We're not going to work until something is done."

The inmates' demands reveal the hellish conditions in which some 60,000 Georgians are held for years on end. Prisoners are confined in overcrowded cells, with very little heat in the winter months and sweltering heat in the summer.

Inmates are protesting the fact that the state now prohibits families to send money through the US postal service; instead, families have to transfer funds through the private company J-Pay, which skims ten percent of the money sent. Another for-profit firm, Global Tel-Link, controls family telephone communications at the prisons, raking in more than $50 per month per inmate for weekly 15-minute calls. Many families of prisoners are poor, and these costs effectively prohibit regular contact with incarcerated loved ones.

Prisoners complain that the DOC has stripped them of any opportunity for training in trades, exercise, or other type of self-improvement. The state offers no educational opportunities beyond earning the

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equivalent of a high school diploma or training in the Baptist ministry.

Instead, inmates are subjected to extremely long sentences and unpaid work assignments that amount to state enslavement. Prisoners are made to cook and serve meals, clean and maintain facilities within the system. They are also sent to clean, maintain, re-paint and repair other government property, pick up trash, mow and maintain state grounds, and other jobs without pay. After serving years behind bars, most prisoners are released with only $25 and a bus ticket.

Conditions in US jails and prisons have deteriorated as state budget crises have deepened. Georgia has the highest prisoner-to-resident ratio in the nation, with one in every thirteen people incarcerated, on probation or parole. In all, the state holds 60,000 prisoners and oversees 150,000 others on probation. The state's prison budget for 2010 exceeded $1 billion.

Forty percent of the state's inmates are incarcerated for non-violent offenses such as drug or property crimes. Victims of draconian sentencing laws, many people are swept up in the corrections system essentially because they suffer from addictions, homelessness or mental illness.

Prisoners are serving longer and longer terms in Georgia, with fewer opportunities to rehabilitate. This is the product of "tough on crime" judicial policies ushered in by the Clinton administration, and in Georgia in the 1990s, by right-wing Governor Zell Miller. Miller introduced a "Two strikes and you're out" law, and classified certain crimes as deserving of life sentences under the 1994 "Seven Deadly Sins" law.

Such reactionary sentencing laws were accompanied by an explosion in the prison system as a for-profit industry. In Georgia, the average prison time served is now 3.4 years—up from 1.6 years two decades ago. Violent offenses carry mandatory minimum sentences of 10 years with no parole; second convictions for violent crimes carry sentences of life without parole. Nearly one-third of inmates are ineligible for ever being considered for parole.

Over the last two decades, the number of prisoners has nearly tripled in Georgia, ranking the state fifth in the nation for the number people it incarcerates, according to the Sentencing Project. African Americans make up 63 percent of the prison population while comprising 30 percent of state residents.

While the General Assembly has refused to either reduce the prison budget or lighten sentencing laws, cost-cutting within the system over the past few years has resulted in extreme overcrowding and inhuman conditions. On average, according to the most recent data from the Pew Center on the States, Georgia spends $49 a day to house a prisoner, compared to the national average of $79 a day.

Many prisons already exceed capacity limits, with inmates triple-bunked. Yet in the past year, the DOC has shuttered multiple facilities and crowded prisoners into still fewer cells. Thousands of other state prisoners are housed in county jails, where they are dispatched to do unpaid labor at the discretion of local government officials.

In numerous counties, prison labor is being used in place of laid-off government and municipal employees to save money. According to a November 2009 report by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, state prisoners housed in county jails soared by 61 percent over the course of 12 months, from 3,278 in 2008 to 5,277 a year later. To house inmates, counties have created "fast-track facilities" and are holding the long-term incarcerated in jails alongside pre-trial detainees.

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