California hunger striker dies as prison conditions deteriorate

Jack Hood
21 February 2012

Christian Alexander Gomez, a 27 year-old inmate, died earlier this month at the Corcoran State Prison in California. He was on the fourth day of a hunger strike against overcrowding and poor living conditions for inmates throughout the California prison system.

Corcoran Prison, in Kings County in the heart of California's Central Valley, is the location of the latest in a series of hunger strikes that have swept across California's notoriously overcrowded prison system. On July 1, 2011, a group of prisoners held in Pelican Bay State Prison's Secure Housing Unit (SHU) began a hunger strike that spread across 13 California State Prisons and involved a total of 6,600 prisoners.

Prisoners cancelled the strike in October to give the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (CDCR) time to re-evaluate policies that prisoners claim violate basic human rights. Prisoners and prison watch groups report that little to no changes have been made.

In 2006, the bipartisan US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons called for drastic reforms to the CDCR's solitary confinement practices. Prisoners and watch groups have also called for reforms to prison segregation policies, the withholding of food from prisoners, a change in medical care availability for prisoners, and a reduction of overcrowding.

California's state prisons have been subject to heavy criticism for overcrowding. Last year, the United States Supreme Court ordered the state to reduce its prison population by 30,000 in *Brown v. Plata*. The court, in a 5-4 decision, ruled that the total prison population in the state—which is roughly 140 percent of the system's capacity—results in conditions that violate prisoners' Eighth Amendment rights. Justice Kennedy, pointing at state prisoner suicide rates that are 80 percent above the national average, proclaimed that conditions for prisoners have resulted in "needless suffering and death".

More than forty percent of prisoners in California are incarcerated for non-violent crimes.

Alexander Gomez, convicted of first degree murder and attempted murder in Los Angeles County, is reported by prison officials to have died of pre-existing health issues—not starvation. CDCR claims that 30 prisoners are currently participating in the Corcoran hunger strike—though prison watch groups claim that CDCR intentionally underestimates the amount of strikers in an attempt to undermine prisoners' attempts to bring attention to the conditions that provoke collective action.

California is currently relying on exporting prisoners to out-of-state facilities, many of which are run not by the state, but by private firms with little or no public accountability. California, whose state government is controlled by the Democratic Party, currently pays Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Michigan to house nearly 10,000 prisoners. This creates hardship for the families of prisoners, who are sometimes unable to travel across the country to visit their relatives.

There are approximately 2.3 million people behind bars in the United States, and the US has a far higher incarceration rate than any other country in the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site