

Overcrowding, budget cuts strain Illinois prisons

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Last Thursday, a near-riot broke out at a minimum-security prison in the Illinois Quad-Cities shortly after the facility lost both power and running water. When prisoners erupted in anger and refused to return to their cells, a tactical team was deployed, threatening prisoners with tear gas until they submitted. The prison was placed on full lockdown until Saturday evening.

Illinois Department of Corrections (DOC) spokeswoman Stacey Solano told the *Quad-City Times* that repair crews accidentally severed a set of power lines Thursday night while attempting to fix a water main break at the East Moline Correctional Center (EMCC).

Gregg Johnson, a prison supply supervisor and president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 46, which represents local prison employees, told the *Moline Dispatch* that the drawn-out heat wave and overcrowding have exacerbated tensions among prisoners. “Correctional officers told me they have never seen anything like it. All hell broke loose.”

According to Johnson, after the facility lost power, enraged prisoners began throwing tables and chairs against windows in the day room. When told to return to their cells, they began chanting, “Hell, no, we won’t go!”

As a minimum-security facility, EMCC predominantly holds individuals convicted of “white-collar,” petty, or drug-related offenses. Although the EMCC was designed to hold approximately 750 inmates, it currently holds nearly 1,300.

John Maki, executive director of the John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA), a prison reform advocacy group based in Chicago, said Illinois prisons are swiftly running out of bed space. According to JHA’s web site, the Illinois prison system is designed for 34,000

inmates but currently holds more than 48,000. In other words, Illinois prisons are presently at 140 percent of capacity. According to DOC projections, the prison population will exceed 49,000 by January.

The JHA website also notes that the Illinois inmate population has grown by nearly 4,000 over the last three years—an increase of almost 10 percent. However, in 1970, the prisoner population was under 7,000. Thus, over the course of 40 years, although the state population has only grown by 12 percent, the number of those behind bars has grown by nearly 700 percent.

In June, Illinois Democratic Governor Pat Quinn signed a budget which slashes spending for state services, including huge cuts to Medicaid (\$1.6 billion), education funding (\$200 million), and child welfare (\$85 million). Among these were cuts of nearly \$60 million for the already overcrowded prison system. In addition to the cuts, the budget plans for the closure of a supermaximum-security prison, a women’s prison, two juvenile detention centers, four halfway houses, and four mental health facilities.

In a statement on Gov. Quinn’s prison closure plan, the JHA noted that, “While every adult prison struggles with the state’s record high inmate population, medium and minimum-security prisons, which overwhelmingly incarcerate low-level offenders serving short sentences, face the most severely crowded conditions. All facilities face serious problems with understaffing and lack of resources, including mental health and drug abuse treatment and rehabilitative programming.”

However, for inmates at supermax prisons, such as the one slated to be closed in southern Illinois, the problem is not overcrowding, but, perhaps more barbarically, solitary confinement. In similar conditions to those in which Private Bradley Manning is kept, inmates condemned to solitary confinement are kept in

isolation for 22 to 23 hours per day, are given just one hour for exercise, are kept under almost constant surveillance, and are almost totally prevented from coming into contact with other people (see “UN torture official denounces treatment of Bradley Manning”).

Numerous reports have shown that extended social isolation can cause permanent psychological deterioration. In October 2011 the UN Special Rapporteur on torture released a report stating that solitary confinement could be deemed equivalent to torture. The report estimated that the US has at least 20,000 to 25,000 prisoners kept in these inhumane conditions, many permanently.

The closure of Illinois’ supermax prison, however, will almost certainly not lead to the improvement of these prisoners’ conditions, as Gov. Quinn has proposed that they be transferred to supermax prisons out of state via a prisoner transfer program.

The ever-growing number of those facing the intolerable conditions of the repressive state apparatus is in no way a trend limited to Illinois. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with 730 individuals per 100,000 behind bars. The US, with less than five percent of the world’s population, holds nearly one quarter of the world’s prisoners.

As of 2008, more than 1 in 100 American adults were in prison or jail. By comparison, Russia has the second highest incarceration rate in the world, at 577 per 100,000; China, whose human rights abuses are hypocritically denounced by the US government, has 120 per 100,000.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies’ *World Prison Brief*, as of December 2010 the US had over 2,200,000 prisoners, more than any other country, and housed them in roughly 4,500 institutions.

Overcrowding is endemic. The report noted that state prisons averaged 115 percent of their nominal capacity, while federal prisons were at 135 percent. Illinois prison overcrowding tops both figures.

In addition to the prison population in America, 5 million more find themselves in some part of the American criminal justice system, either on probation or parole.

As the economic crisis worsens, states are preparing deeper cuts in their budgets, further exacerbating the sharp deterioration in the living conditions of the imprisoned.



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