

Deteriorating conditions in Illinois prisons lead to hunger strike

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19 February 2013

Nearly 50 prisoners launched a hunger strike on February 4 at Pontiac Correctional Center, a maximum-security prison in central Illinois. As of February 16, almost two weeks later, some 25 inmates remained on the strike.

The protest comes in the midst of increased overcrowding and growing violent confrontations. On January 29, Pontiac was reportedly placed on lockdown after a prison guard was injured by an inmate. A prison at Pickneyville, Illinois, reported an attack on a guard in January, and Menard Correctional Center, located 70 miles south of St. Louis, has seen at least two attacks on guards over the last month and a half, in addition to an inmate dying there under suspicious circumstances.

Among other complaints, the hunger strikers at Pontiac (which is the oldest prison in Illinois and the eighth-oldest in the country) have stated that Plexiglas barriers placed on their cell doors, installed recently supposedly to increase security, are preventing their rooms from being heated. Inmates are protesting as well against a lack of necessities, such as the forms required for them to receive visits, legal-sized envelopes, cleaning supplies and hygiene products. Inmates have claimed that they are charged \$5 to use items like nail clippers, and that these utensils are not sterilized between uses, even though some of the prisoners have communicable diseases.

The Uptown People's Law Center noted at the beginning of the protest that prisoners could face punishment for launching the hunger strike. "They don't take these decisions lightly. They are well aware of the risks," Legal Director Alan Mills told WSIL, a southern Illinois television station. Indeed, a few days after the hunger strike began, an article in the *Pontiac Daily Leader* stated that some prisoners who had made formal complaints felt that they were being harassed

and retaliated against by guards and prison administrators.

Protests over intolerable prison conditions have been steadily increasing since the onset of the financial meltdown in 2008, particularly in those states, such as California and Illinois, where the budget crisis is deepest. A 27-year-old inmate died in California almost exactly one year ago, after a four-day hunger strike similarly launched in protest against overcrowding and poor living conditions (see "California hunger striker dies as prison conditions deteriorate").

Notably, a significant portion of those participating in the current hunger strike are said to have been transferred from Tamms, the "supermax" prison in southern Illinois that was closed at the end of last December. Some of these prisoners have claimed that conditions at Pontiac are actually worse than what they faced at Tamms.

The ACLU has recently estimated that as many as 25 percent of inmates housed at Tamms had been in continuous solitary confinement for 10 years or more. As numerous studies have shown, even relatively short periods of social isolation can have devastating and permanent physical and psychological consequences. Last fall, in fact, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture issued a finding that stated indefinite solitary confinement constitutes a form of torture.

However, the closure of Tamms and the transfer of those inmates to maximum-security prisons were hardly motivated by an upsurge of concern over the welfare of those prisoners. Just last week, the Illinois Department of Corrections announced that because of overcrowding, six prisons throughout the state would begin housing inmates in gymnasiums. The Illinois prison system now houses nearly 50,000 inmates in a system designed to hold 33,000.

Over the last 40 years, although the state population has only grown 12 percent, the number of those behind bars has grown from 7,000 to more than 49,000, an increase of almost 700 percent and the result of the right-wing, “law-and-order” policies pursued by both major parties.

The deterioration of prison conditions ultimately has its roots in the intractable crisis of capitalism. On the one hand, as social inequality continues to soar and opposition grows among workers, the Obama administration and the political establishment generally are turning to increasingly brutal and anti-democratic forms of rule. On the other hand, both Democrats and Republicans are using the financial crisis as a pretext for launching the initial waves of austerity against the most vulnerable layers of society: the elderly and infirm, students and youth, the desperately poor, and prisoners, among others.

Many of those who currently work as guards themselves were once skilled laborers who were left unemployed after the US was deindustrialized.

Illinois governor Pat Quinn, a Democrat, has made the closure of state prisons a key component of his budget-cutting agenda, which has slashed state funding for Medicaid by more than a billion dollars and is in the process of targeting state employee pensions. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents Illinois prison guards, has vocally campaigned against Quinn’s plans to close down state prisons.

AFSCME’s protests against prison overcrowding and violence, however, are in no way motivated by humanitarian interest over the fate and living conditions of prisoners—in fact, quite the opposite.

As Friedrich Engels noted in his classic work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the repressive power of the capitalist state, which “consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds...increases in the same ratio in which the class antagonisms become more pronounced.”

In opposing Quinn’s prison closure plan, AFSCME seeks only to protect the institutional interests of the prison guards in this repressive state apparatus; their dispute with Quinn amounts to no more than tactical differences over how to most effectively manage these “institutions of coercion.” Only the working class,

basing itself on a revolutionary socialist program, can once and for all do away with this system of oppression and put an end to the domination of class by class.



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