30,000 inmates take part in California's largest hunger strike

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Nearly 30,000 inmates across two-thirds of California's 33 prisons are entering into their fourth day of what has become the largest hunger strike in California history.

Almost a quarter of the approximately 150,000 inmates throughout California's vast prison system, including those housed in privately-owned out-of-state facilities contracted by the state, are protesting deteriorating prison conditions and the use of indefinite solitary confinement, a form of state-sanctioned torture.

In addition to the inmates taking part in the hunger strike, 2,300 inmates did not attend work or class by either refusing to do so, or claiming that they were sick.

The recent opposition to the deteriorating living conditions in California prisons started at Pelican Bay State Prison in 2011, when a smaller number of inmates launched a hunger strike and protested against the indiscriminate use of indefinite solitary confinement against individuals suspected of having gang ties.

There are currently over 10,000 inmates in California that are held in some form of solitary confinement. One of the five "core demands" of the current hunger strike is that solitary confinement be limited to a maximum of five years—an extraordinary length of time for an individual to spend 23 hours a day in a small cell, with no interaction.

The other four demands are that "adequate and nutritious food" be provided; "group punishments [for individual actions] and administrative abuse" be eliminated; "constructive programming" be created and expanded for those in solitary confinement; and a program used to identify gang members—which rewards individuals who provide information on other inmates—be abolished.

On July 1, one week before the hunger strike began, ten inmates from the maximum security High Desert State Prison (HDSP), located in Susanville, California, issued an open letter demanding more humane living conditions. They announced plans to move forward with a hunger strike, which they described as a form of "peaceful protest" until their demands were met. On Tuesday, after over a week of refusing food, the ten inmates from HDSP were placed on medical watch just as the statewide hunger strike entered its second day of action.

One form of solitary confinement used in California is the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) program, which houses 4,527 prisoners—1,180 of which are held at Pelican Bay.

On average, inmates living in SHU will serve seven and a half years in solitary confinement—two and a half years longer than the five year limit demanded by the prisoners. There are currently 89 individuals who have been held in solitary confinement for over 20 years.

Inmates in solitary confinement are allowed only one hour of exercise in a 16 by 25 foot room, infamously known as the "dog run."

Of California's more than 10,000 inmates held in some form of solitary confinement, approximately 3,000 of those are being held in extreme isolation for life. The cells that house these inmates have no windows, no access to fresh air or sunlight. The United Nations officially identifies holding prisoners in solitary confinement for more than 15 days as torture.

Shane Bauer, one of the American hikers who was held hostage in Iran for twenty-six months, recently toured Pelican Bay State Prison. "My guide asks me how it compares to Iran, where I was held for twenty-six months. I want to tell him that no part of my experience—not the uncertainty of when I would be free again, not the tortured screams of other prisoners—was worse than the four months I spent in solitary. But

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that's not what comes out. All I can say is, 'I had a window.'"

California's state prisons were recently at the center of a legal debate surrounding overcrowding and the Eighth Amendment. In 2011—in the 5-4, United States Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Plata—the* court ordered the state to reduce its prison population by 30,000 inmates from the level of 144,000. As of April, however, the prison population in California had grown to almost 150,000 inmates. The result has no doubt been a worsening of living conditions that inmates face, violating their Eighth Amendment right, which prohibits the government from cruel and unusual punishment.

Justice Kennedy had noted in the ruling that the state prisoner suicide rates are 80 percent above the national average, creating conditions that result in "needless suffering and death."

Rather than reducing prison populations or address the demands raised by inmates, California has more and more relied on exporting prisoners to out-of-state facilities run by private firms with little or no public accountability. These for-profit facilities house nearly 10,000 California inmates, creating further hardship as some family members are unable to travel across country. Currently California utilizes facilities in Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Michigan.

The resumption of inmate opposition and the launching of the mass statewide hunger strike on Monday are an indication that conditions have only gotten worse since 2011

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