

Inmates in California enter second week of statewide hunger strike

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On Monday, July 8, approximately 30,000 inmates across more than two-thirds of California's 33 prisons—in addition to the four out-of-state for-profit facilities utilized by the state—began refusing meals to protest inhumane prison conditions and the use of indefinite solitary confinement practices. The hunger strike, now entering its ninth day, is the largest in state history.

According to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), as of July 15, “2,572 inmates in 17 state prisons” were participating in the statewide hunger strike, with “258 inmates [refusing] to participate in their work assignments or attend educational classes.”

The CDCR only considers an inmate on hunger strike if they have refused nine consecutive meals. As a result, the official tally of inmates participating tends to conceal the actual size of the statewide action. On July 11, after inmates had refused their ninth meal, the CDCR for the first time acknowledged the strike.

The *Los Angeles Times* cited Elaine Gurule, the mother of two men participating in the strike. “They are getting sick,” she said. According to the *Times*, “Gurule said her sons, participating in the hunger strike that began July 8, were weak and dizzy. She expressed surprise that prison officials had not weighed the inmates, but instead handed them ‘do not resuscitate’ forms to fill out in case they collapse.”

“They’re trying to make it hard on them,” Gurule added.

Despite a 2011 Supreme Court ruling against the state of California—which called for a reduction in the state’s prison population, and characterized prison conditions as violating an inmates’s Eighth Amendment constitutional right against cruel and unusual punishment—the CDCR continues to operate

the state prison system far above the court-mandated level.

An investigative report, published in the November/December 2012 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine, found that at least 11,730 inmates—nearly nine percent of the almost 133,000 individuals imprisoned by the state of California—are held in some form of solitary confinement. In 2011 the UN’s Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, called for the “absolute prohibition” of solitary confinement beyond 15 days, which the UN recognizes as a form of torture.

There is no international legal consensus on what solitary confinement precisely consists of. However, Solitary Watch, an online media and advocacy project aimed at raising public awareness on the widespread use of solitary confinement in the United States, clarifies what at times can be a purposefully ambiguous term.

“Solitary confinement,” they write, “is the practice of isolating inmates in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades. Few prison systems use the term ‘solitary confinement,’ instead referring to prison ‘segregation’ [e.g. administrative or disciplinary segregation]. In California, long-term solitary confinement units are referred to as Security Housing Units (SHUs); in New York, the same acronym stands for Special Housing Units. In Oregon, the long-term isolation units are called Intensive Management Units (IMUs), while in Pennsylvania they are called Restricted Housing Units (RHUs). In the federal system, one type of extreme solitary confinement takes place in Communication Management Units (CMUs). Despite the variety of names, the general practice of incarceration in these units and facilities is solitary confinement.”

The ongoing mass hunger strike, which raises as one of its demands the end to indefinite solitary confinement practices, was organized and called for by the Short Corridor Collective (SCC), a group of inmates held in Security Housing Units (SHUs) at Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP). The SCC was also behind the initial hunger strikes of 2011, where inmates across California first backed the five “core demands” being raised.

In addition to calling for an end to “long-term solitary confinement,” inmates are also demanding an end to “group punishment and administrative abuse;” elimination of the “debriefing policy,” which grants privileges to inmates who provide information on others, as well as the modification of “gang status criteria;” access to “adequate and nutritious food;” and, the expansion and provision of “constructive programming and privileges for indefinite SHU status inmates.”

There are at least 4,527 inmates currently serving indefinite SHU terms in California, with 1,180 of them held at PBSP alone. These inmates are forced to live in cells that measure just over 11 by 7 feet, deprived of human interaction, the majority of whom are only given one hour of solitary exercise a day. Inmates have described solitary confinement practices as a form of state-sanctioned torture.

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