

Inmates punished in California prison hunger strike

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Thousands of inmates across California are entering their twelfth day of a hunger strike—the largest in state history—that has spread to over two-thirds of the state’s 33 prisons and to the four out-of-state for-profit facilities utilized by the state. Inmates began refusing meals on July 8 to protest inhumane prison conditions and the use of indefinite solitary confinement practices.

As of Thursday, according to a press release issued by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), “1,457 inmates in 15 state prisons [were] on a mass hunger strike disturbance”—which means those participating had refused at least nine consecutive meals—while another “48 inmates in three state prisons refused to participate in their work assignments.” The first week of the hunger strike saw as many as 30,000 inmates refusing meals.

The CDCR, which oversees the California prison system, has taken retributive action against participants of the hunger strike. On Wednesday, for example, 14 inmates identified as leaders in the mass hunger strike were moved to more isolated quarters—known as Administrative Segregation Units (Ad-Seg)—where their belongings, including legal documents and access to news, were taken away. Included in the seized legal documents were potential settlement terms that inmates had drafted for upcoming court hearings related to 8th Amendment violations. The stolen information will now almost certainly be used against them in those proceedings.

All 14 of the inmates moved to Ad-Seg for their involvement in the hunger strike were also signatories to a manifesto that called for the unification of prisoners across races and ethnicities in their fight against California prison conditions.

Terry Thornton, a spokesperson for the CDCR, gave

a warning to inmates that future consequences were imminent. “They should allow their lawsuit to take its course and not be protesting.” Unification poses a grave threat for prison management, which uses race and ethnicity to incite violence and pit prisoners against one another.

As inmates continue their hunger strike, their health is of little concern to prison officials. Inmates are not scheduled for a medical check-up until they have gone 17 days without food—that is, until they have refused 51 consecutive meals. So far, two inmates have gone to the hospital for medical treatment.

Mark Morocco, professor of emergency medicine at UCLA, was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* yesterday on the dire consequences of starvation. He explained that the prisoners’ bodies will eventually begin eating their own muscles after the depletion of glucose and fat reserves. “Even if you don’t eat, your body is going to eat. It can eat itself.”

In addition to moving inmates into even more confined quarters, two lawyers who represent some of the striking prisoners were also banned from the entire state prison system. Marilyn McMahon, who heads the advocacy group California Prison Focus, was informed on Tuesday by CDCR Undersecretary Martin Hoshino that her access to inmates had been cut off.

The explanation given by Hoshino was based on unverified claims that a CPF volunteer made some form of an unspecified threat against CDCR. However, as McMahon explains, “I’m a target because I do help them communicate with the outside world.” This was not the first time California Prison Focus was targeted for working with striking inmates.

In 2011, during the initial hunger strikes across California prisons that began at Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP), McMahon’s group was also banned

from accessing inmates, along with other prisoners' rights organizations. The ban was eventually lifted after investigations found no wrongdoing.

The CDCR continues to express an unwillingness to discuss the demands and issues raised by inmates in the ongoing mass hunger strike. Laura Magnani, who was involved in the mediation talks that ended the 2011 hunger strike and who represents the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), stated that her group was in a "wait-and-see mode" with the state.

The punishment of inmates involved in the mass statewide hunger strike—through the use of Ad-Seg, where inmates are housed in cells smaller than typical isolation units, such as Security Housing Units (SHUs), or the blocking of inmates' access to their lawyers—is meant to intimidate and demoralize those involved in what the CDCR characterizes as a "mass disturbance." Such tactics were utilized in 2011 in an attempt to force inmates to end the hunger strike early.

Todd Ashker, a leader of the 2011 hunger strike, described his treatment by the CDCR during that struggle, where he and other inmates were placed in Ad-Seg for their activities. "We were all isolated on a tier, in strip cells with nothing but a set of clothes and fish kit—spoon, cup, bar of soap etc.—with ice cold air blasting outta the vents! The warden personally told us, 'As soon as you eat, you can go back to your SHU (Security Housing Units) cells.' My 'mattress' was not even a mattress. It only had lumps of padding in places and was only 50 inches long—on ice cold concrete. This was all intentional, by design. They know that when a person is subject to cold, the body requires more energy. When you're not eating, the ice will cause your body to feed on muscle and internal organs and the brain etc. much faster. Permanent damage can happen a lot faster."



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