

State government retaliates against leaders of California prisons strike

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California inmates protesting inhumane prison conditions and the use of indefinite solitary confinement are well into their third week of a mass statewide hunger strike. The hunger strike, which began on July 8 and attracted as many as 30,000 inmates at its peak, is the largest in state history.

On Monday the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) issued a press release with its updated figures on what the department has characterized as an illegal “mass disturbance.” According to the official CDCR tally, “986 inmates in 11 state prisons” were participating in the statewide hunger strike on Monday, with an additional “42 inmates in one state prison [refusing] to participate in their work assignments.” An inmate must refuse 9 consecutive meals in order to be considered on hunger strike by the CDCR; 51 meals must be refused before an inmate receives medical treatment.

At the heart of the mass hunger strike are five “core demands” raised by inmates throughout the state. The demands—first issued prior to the 2011 hunger strikes by the Short Corridor Collective (SCC), a group of inmates held in solitary confinement in the Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) Security Housing Unit (SHU)—focus on improving prison conditions, eliminating abusive practices and dangerous policies, and limiting solitary confinement to a maximum of five years.

According to an investigative report published in the November-December 2012 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine, some 51 percent of the more than 1,100 inmates held in the PBSP SHU had spent at least 5 years in solitary confinement; 89 of those individuals had spent at least 20 years in the SHU. The average time spent in the PBSP SHU is 7.5 years. A September 2012 Amnesty International report, which dealt with

2011 figures released by the CDCR, published similar findings on the PBSP SHU.

The two most common forms of solitary confinement in California prisons are Administrative Segregation Units (Ad-Seg), used to hold inmates for disciplinary violations, and the SHUs, purportedly used to isolate “identified” gang members and other potentially “dangerous” inmates. Across the entire California prison system there were at least 11,730 inmates held in some form of solitary confinement last year, with approximately 6,700 inmates in Ad-Seg and over 3,800 indefinitely held in SHUs.

Solitary confinement beyond 15 days is considered a form of torture by the United Nations. The UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, called for its “absolute prohibition” following the 2011 hunger strikes. More recently, Méndez has stated that he doesn’t “think any argument, including gang membership, can justify a very long-term measure [e.g. SHU] that is inflicting pain and suffering that is prohibited by the Convention Against Torture.”

Numerous studies have warned of the psychological effects that isolation can have on individuals. According to one study conducted in 2003 by Craig Haney, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 88 percent of inmates held in the PBSP SHU experienced “irrational anger,” almost 30 times the rate of the US population at large. It only takes 10 days in solitary confinement for an inmate to show “negative psychiatric symptoms.” In addition, Haney found that “41 percent of SHU inmates reported hallucinations” and “[27] percent [had] suicidal thoughts.”

From 2007 to 2010, according to the CDCR, inmates in isolation were eight times more likely to commit suicide than those held in general population.

As inmates continue to peacefully protest, those identified as leaders in the hunger strike are facing retaliation from prison officials. In an effort to break the hunger strike, prison guards have reportedly begun blasting cold air into the cells of inmates moved to Ad-Seg for organizing the hunger strike.

While CDCR's Deputy Press Secretary Terry Thornton denies this is occurring, the practice has been verified by outsiders. Last Friday the *Guardian* newspaper quoted civil rights attorney Anne Weills after her visit to PBSP. She described seeing inmates "shivering in front of [her]," clearly "suffering," and "at risk of hypothermia." Despite wearing two sweaters during her visit, Weills reported being "freezing." She said that the lowering of temperatures in the prisoners' cells was "clearly a tactic to make everything uncomfortable."

Alfred Sandoval, a striking inmate at PBSP, also disputed Thornton's claim. "[In] a postcard to his wife," the *Guardian* reported, Sandoval wrote that "guards had 'turned the blowers on' just as they did in 2011 during the previous hunger strike."

On Tuesday, Amnesty International also reported that the "core group of hunger strikers" at PBSP said that prison authorities had "confiscated fluids, hygiene products and legal materials." Other participants in the protest have also had their belongings taken from them and their communications with lawyers blocked.

As the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously wrote in 1862, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."



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