

# Inmates end California's largest hunger strike

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After nearly two months of protesting inhumane solitary confinement practices, inmates in California's vast prison system have ended their hunger strike. The hunger strike, which began on July 8, attracted as many as 30,000 inmates at its peak, making it the largest mass hunger strike in state history.

The hunger strike comes to an end as California State Senator Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley) and State Assembly Member Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco) have agreed to hold joint public hearings on solitary confinement and whether it constitutes a human rights violation. In 2011 Juan E. Méndez, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Torture, called for the "absolute prohibition" of solitary confinement beyond 15 days, which the UN identifies as torture. The hearings are expected to begin in October.

The conclusion of the mass statewide hunger strike in California has been met with relief by the political establishment as well as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), which had described the strike as an "illegal mass disturbance."

"We are pleased this dangerous strike has been called off before any inmates became seriously ill," a CDCR statement said. "CDCR will continue to implement the substantive reforms in California's Security Housing Units [SHUs] that we initiated two years ago."

In a statement Hancock said, "The issues raised by the hunger strike are real—concerns about the use and conditions of solitary confinement in California's prisons—and will not be ignored." However, for years prison conditions have been ignored by the political establishment. Over the past few years California prisons have witnessed at least three different mass hunger strikes in response to inhumane prison conditions.

A federal judge from the US District Court in San

Francisco recently granted prison officials authority to force-feed inmates, raising comparisons with "Camp X-Ray" at Guantanamo Bay. No inmates were ultimately subjected to the horrendous procedure.

With over 10,000 inmates in California held in some form of solitary confinement, one of the five "core demands" raised by the 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 windowless cell with no human interaction. Inmates in solitary confinement are allowed only one hour of exercise a day in a 16 by 25 foot room, infamously known as the "dog run."

On August 26, the CDCR issued a press release "responding" to the inmates' five "core demands." Responding to each demand in a point-by-point fashion, the press release either stated that the "issue [had] already been addressed" or that the issue was "non-negotiable." That is, inmates' demands were ignored once again.

In its 5-4 ruling on *Brown v. Plata*, the Supreme Court in 2011 ordered the state to reduce its prison population by over 33,000 inmates in order to reach a capacity level of 137.5 percent, or approximately 110,000 total inmates. Currently the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is operating at over 150 percent of state capacity, with more than 124,000 individuals housed in state-run facilities. The California prison system was only built to safely house some 80,000 inmates.

The result of this overcrowding has been a worsening of prison conditions, which, according to the high court's ruling, violated inmates' Eighth Amendment right against cruel and unusual punishment. Justice Kennedy noted in that ruling that California's prisoner suicide rates were 80 percent above the national

average, creating conditions that resulted in “needless suffering and death.” *The authors also recommend:* California prison conditions behind largest hunger strike in state history [13 July 2013] California judge authorizes force-feeding of prisoners on hunger strike [22 August 2013]



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