

US immigration detainees begin hunger strike

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On Friday, March 7, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced that 750 of the 1,300 detainees being held at an immigration holding center in Tacoma, Washington had refused meals. An attorney representing the group has explained that this refusal is the beginning of a hunger strike to demand better conditions at the facility and an end to US deportations, the number of which has been exacerbated by the policies of the Obama administration.

The facility, Northwest Detention Center, was opened in 2004 as a privately-operated immigration prison and is run by the GEO Group on behalf of ICE. This is one of many prisons used by the US government to detain suspected illegal immigrants who are under investigation pending deportation. While the official average stay in the detention center is four months, most remain far longer and there have been reports of some immigrants being kept in such facilities for years.

While locked up, detainees are put to work in the facility's kitchens or performing cleaning services and are paid only one dollar per day for their labor, converting the immigrant population into a de facto cheap-labor force within the prison walls. In addition to demanding a higher rate of pay for their work, the detainees are also protesting the harsh treatment by many of the facility's guards and the poor quality of food served.

Sandy Restrepo, the attorney who represents several of the detainees, has explained to reporters that the hunger strike will continue for at least five days and is likely to last much longer. Restrepo, who has represented hundreds of such detainees over the years, stated that the people in the detention center "are human beings, not criminals, and they deserve better treatment."

The hunger strike is not isolated and is by no means exceptional. Just last month, family members of detainees outside a similar prison in Arizona went on a

hunger strike for several days, including a mother of three whose husband has been held for more than a year. "My family is not complete without him. I need him home now," she said in a statement.

Another hunger strike began in California last year, when prisoners sought to draw attention to the policy of keeping some inmates in near isolation for years. The hunger strike ended after two months when legislators agreed to hold hearings on the practice. Additionally, two dozen protesters were arrested last month outside the White House in Washington, DC during a protest directed at President Obama regarding deportation issues.

During the first four years of Obama's presidency, nearly 1.6 million immigrants were deported from the United States, three-quarters the number deported during the entire eight-year presidency of George W. Bush. At this rate, the Obama administration will surmount its predecessor in immigrants deported by the end of 2014 as the running total surpasses 2 million.

In fact, the number of annual deportations has exponentially increased nearly every year since 1999, hitting record highs in many of those years and growing by 134 percent between 1999 and 2012. This is due in part to the establishment of the "bed mandate" in 2006, which requires that ICE hold an average of 34,000 immigrants in custody per day, which adds up to more than 400,000 per year. While officials claim to fill this quota with immigrants convicted of criminal charges and who endanger the lives of US citizens, the massive quotas cannot be filled with such individuals alone.

Illegal immigrants with no criminal records and deep ties to families in the US are therefore increasingly being targeted by deportation agents. During a 16-month period ending last October, 48 percent of the 350,000 immigrants who were transferred to ICE from local jails had no criminal convictions or traffic violations.

In response to harsh public criticism, Obama has defended himself by blaming Congress. During a press conference, he explained that “until Congress passes a new law, then I am constrained in terms of what I am able to do.” However, a leading member of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network has argued that “the president has both the legal authority and the moral obligation to stop deportations. If he doesn’t want to do it, it’s not because he can’t. It’s because he doesn’t have the political will to do it.” Such attempts to appeal to Obama’s morality have fallen on deaf ears.

The only official response to the hunger strike thus far has come from Seattle-based ICE spokesman Andrew Muñoz who stated that “ICE fully respects the rights of all people to express their opinion without interference.” An ICE statement explains that detainees will only be considered on hunger strike after refusing meals for 72 hours, at which time they will be medically monitored.



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