

# Hundreds of undocumented migrants begin hunger strike at Tacoma, Washington detention facility

Kevin Martinez  
1 August 2014

Hundreds of detainees at the Northwest Detention Center, an immigrant detention facility in Tacoma, Washington, began a hunger strike on Wednesday to protest the inhumane conditions at the jail and the Obama administration's immigration policy. The strikes are in coordination with several immigrant rights groups that will be marching to the White House on Saturday to demand an end to deportations and wider immigration reform.

According to Latino Advocacy, at least 10 pods, each containing 55 to 85 people, have refused food. Authorities do not recognize a hunger strike until 72 hours have passed since an inmate has refused food. The facility in Tacoma has had several hunger strikes since the start of the year and is run by a private company notorious for inhumane treatment of prisoners.

The planned protests on Saturday in Washington, D.C., led by #Not1More, have demanded that President Obama meet personally with undocumented leaders. They have worked to channel the widespread anger over the deportations of immigrants, particularly the recent influx of unaccompanied children, into the safe confines of the Democratic Party. As Maru Mora Villalpando of Latino Advocacy told the *Guardian*, "We're gathering people from across the nation to pressure Obama. And when there are negotiations, we want to make sure that we have a seat at the table."

Under the Obama administration, 2 million undocumented migrants will be deported before the end of the year, the highest number of deportations in US history. The White House is also speeding up the deportation process for children caught at the border, sending them back to the countries from which they

sought to flee misery and probable death. In addition, Obama has requested \$3.7 billion from Congress to further militarize the border.

In March of this year, 1,200 detainees went on hunger strike to protest grossly inadequate medical care, poor quality and quantity of food, exorbitant fees for commissary items like bonds and phone calls, and the one-dollar-a-day pay rate for work inside the jail. The Northwest Detention Center is run on behalf of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by the GEO Group, the second-largest for-profit prison company in the US.

The GEO Group has been the subject of numerous lawsuits across the country alleging unconstitutional and inhumane treatment of detainees. Assaults are common in for-profit prisons, and physical and sexual abuse by staff is widespread. In 2012, GEO was forced to close a youth detention center in Walnut Grove, Mississippi, after being condemned by Judge Carlton Reeves for allowing "a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions to germinate, the sum of which places the offenders at substantial ongoing risk." Prisoners at GEO facilities have also staged hunger strikes in Conroe, Texas, and Stewart, Georgia.

The Democratic Party governor of California, Jerry Brown, reported in January of this year that the GEO Group gave \$54,400 to his reelection efforts. The group has spent \$7.6 million on campaign contributions in the US in the last 10 years. GEO has also lobbied to strongly advance mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strikes laws and truth-in-sentencing laws that greatly lengthen the amount of time spent in jail for drug convictions and other non-violent crimes.

The hunger strike at the Tacoma facility is at least the

third such action this year. The detention center is one of the biggest in the nation and it is part of a network of 250 facilities across the US that collectively hold 34,000 people set to be deported. The prisoners can languish months to years to wait for their eventual deportations. There is also a so-called bed mandate, which requires the ICE to imprison an average of 34,000 undocumented migrants per day, totaling 400,000 per year.

Though the Obama administration claims that it is only interested in deporting dangerous criminals and not those with families in the US, the truth is that the vast majority of detainees are convicted of lesser crimes so that the ICE can fulfill its quotas. In a 12-month period ending last October, 48 percent of the 350,000 immigrants transferred to the ICE from local jails had no criminal convictions or traffic violations.

Detainees at Northwest Detention Center have two options: they can sign a “voluntary” deportation form and be immediately dumped in their country of origin, or they can fight their deportation in a lengthy process in court that can last for years. Since the cases are civil and not criminal, they are not mandated court-appointed lawyers, and at least 80% of detainees in Tacoma don’t have a lawyer, according to the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.

There are no “contact visits” allowed at the Tacoma jail. Glass panes separate detainees from visitors, and they must speak through phones. Relatives of detainees and immigrant rights groups have staged regular rallies outside the jail. The ACLU of Washington State filed a lawsuit in March after 20 hunger strikers were moved to solitary confinement as punishment. Many of the hunger strikers, at least 130 people, were simply deported after over a month of forgoing meals.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**