

Hunger strikes spread in immigrant jails in US Southwest

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Immigrant detainees have launched several hunger strikes in detention centers in California and Texas to protest the terrible living conditions they have to face.

In Adelanto, California, more than 300 men stopped eating meals on October 30 at a detention center run by the for-profit prison company, GEO Group. In recent weeks there have been other major hunger strikes in Texas and Louisiana as well, involving hundreds of immigrants.

At the Adelanto Detention Facility immigrants come mostly from Central America, which has suffered from decades of crime, corruption and brutal US-backed wars. Many have applied for asylum only to be locked up in jail for months, if not years, before they are deported back to their countries of origin.

Shannah Abdullah, a detainee from Ghana who joined the hunger strike this week with 90 other men, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We won’t stop. If it’s going to take us one week or one month we will continue.” Abdullah had been in custody with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for over 11 months after he asked for amnesty at the Mexican border.

ICE officials have sought to downplay the number of hunger strikers, saying the real number is “only” 30 and that they have met with detainees to address their concerns. The Adelanto center was recently expanded by 650 beds to 1,940 beds to accommodate the sheer number of detained immigrants.

The facility already has two deaths under its watch. In 2012, a Mexican immigrant named Fernando Dominguez died from pneumonia because, in the words of a Homeland Security inspection, he “received an unacceptable level of medical care.” Earlier this year, another detainee, Raul Ernesto Morales-Ramos from El Salvador, died from an undiagnosed intestinal cancer

after four years of ICE detention. According to his family attorney, Ramos had complained numerous times to the medical staff about his worsening condition to no avail.

The hunger strikers at Adelanto have demanded better medical care and a grievance counselor who does not work for GEO Group. The strikers have also called on GEO Group to provide dental care, better food instead of “slices of cold turkey,” and to be treated with respect.

In a three-page handwritten note, they state, “We are detainees and not prisoners. We are humans who have the misfortune of being detained. We also respectfully and humbly ask that no retaliation be taken upon any of us detained here in Adelanto by any GEO or ICE staff in our right to unite for a common cause and to protect one another in our peacefull [sic] protest and demonstration.”

The Adelanto facility has a long history of abuse, with reports of at least four instances of extreme physical abuse by GEO staff, including a confirmed death and a miscarriage.

Hunger strikes have also spread to other immigrant detention facilities throughout the US. At the El Paso detention center in Texas it was reported that 54 South Asian men have refused meals, joined five days later by another hunger strike by 14 South Asian men at the LaSalle Detention Center in Louisiana. Last week also saw 27 women, mostly from Central America, go on hunger strike at the T. Don Hutto Facility in Austin, Texas, demanding an end to their mistreatment and immediate release.

The Hutto facility is run by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest for-profit prison company in the world. The women at the facility have claimed they have been discriminated against for

going on a hunger strike. One woman, Francisca Morales Macías, a domestic abuse survivor from Mexico held for seven months, has reportedly been transferred to the mostly male South Texas Detention Complex.

In an interview with *Democracy Now!* Morales Macías described her ordeal escaping organized crime in Mexico before applying for asylum in the US. She pleaded, “Please help me. If they deport me, not much time will pass before they kill me.” Advocates for the women prisoners have said that the hunger strike could be in the hundreds since the facility is designed to hold at least 500 women at a time.

The hunger strikes are in response to the Obama administration’s inhumane anti-immigrant policies. More than 2 million men, women and children have been deported during the last seven years, the largest total in US history. Last month, the United Nation Refugee Agency warned, “Women in Central America and Mexico are fleeing their countries in rising numbers to escape a surge in deadly, unchecked gang violence, fueling a looming refugee crisis in the Americas.”

The *Guardian* also published an investigation last month that detailed how Obama’s immigration policies, including forced deportation, are having deadly consequences for immigrants and asylum seekers who are being dumped back into their countries of origin. At least 83 US deportees have been killed since their return to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras since January 2014, according to one study.

In September a report by a federal government-appointed commission found that once on US soil, immigrant refugees are forced into jails or “detention centers” where numerous abuses take place, including denial of food and medical care, lack of due process and allegations of sexual assault.

The protests in California and Texas follow several other hunger strikes that were launched earlier this year, including a strike led by immigrant mothers at the Karnes Detention Camp in Texas. Last year, nine current and former detainees at the Aurora Detention Center in Colorado sued GEO Group for violating the state’s minimum wage law as well as the Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act, which forbids forced labor, accusing the company of profiting off of detainees.



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