

Alabama inmates strike against deplorable prison conditions

Our reporter
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On Sunday, May 1, inmates at Holman, Staton and Elmore Correctional Facilities in Alabama began a coordinated labor strike against deteriorating conditions and unfair labor practices at their prisons.

Approximately 400 prisoners have gone on strike and more are expected to follow with inmates at the St. Clair Correctional Facility expected to join on May 9. The inmates are seeking legislative reform for a vast improvement in their living conditions and are expected to continue striking for 30 days, although leaders of the strike have stated that it may last longer, depending upon the response from Alabama legislators.

Retaliating against the striking inmates, prison officials have begun serving reduced meal sizes to all inmates at the striking prisons. The tactic, known as “bird feeding,” is being used by prison officials to create animosity between striking and nonstriking inmates in attempt to smother the ongoing strike.

Moreover, fearing a growth of support for the strike amongst inmates, the ADOC has placed all inmates—striking and nonstriking—in indefinite solitary confinement. The ADOC has described the move as a “lockdown with limited inmate movement.”

In late March, an inmate at the Elmore Correctional Facility, north of Montgomery, Alabama, who was actively organizing for what would become current inmate worker strike, was fatally stabbed. The death shook inmates who were also co-organizing the strike, with many believing the lack of quality and accessible healthcare at the prison significantly contributed to the inmate’s death. As such, a larger, more organized strike was sought.

Speaking to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, an inmate and co-organizer of the strike stated, “Those types of things caused the guys in Elmore to be like, ‘Hey man, this could happen to me. We need some help.’ So they started reaching out to organizations, trying to find out who

would help.”

The inmates would come into contact with the Free Alabama Movement, a prisoner advocacy group that would play a large role in organizing the strike. In January 2013, the Free Alabama Movement helped to organize a strike at the Holman Correctional Facility. Inmates at the Elmore and St. Clair correctional facilities followed suit and joined the strike days later. The strike would last for roughly three weeks.

A Holman inmate and co-founder of the Free Alabama Movement told the *Montgomery Advertiser*, “I’m in solitary confinement indefinitely for orchestrating the last one. It is wicked. It’s one of the most dangerous, unsanitary places in the state.”

The many striking inmates are contracted workers who perform duties around the prisons they are housed in. Many prisoners, in fact, are contracted with outside for-profit companies.

At the Holman Correctional Facility, inmates produce license plates for the state of Alabama and bed linens, such as sheets and pillowcases, for other prisons in Alabama. A number of inmates at the Elmore Correctional Facility work at a canning and recycling plant. According to the Free Alabama Movement there is a vehicle restoration and chemical plant at the Clair Correctional Facility whose profits are over \$25 million a year.

Inmates in Alabama state prisons are paid a minimum of 17 cents an hour to a maximum of 71 cents an hours. According to a statement produced by the Free Alabama Movement, “The State and the ADOC [Alabama Department of Corrections] are profiting hundreds of millions of dollars off the approximately 10,000 free laborers who report to work each day inside of their prisons, to jobs in the kitchen, maintenance, runners, road squads, laundry, libraries and gyms, to stores and sandwich shops, yard crews, infirmaries and dorm

cleaners etc.”

Compounding this are the deplorable conditions surrounding inmates in the prisons.

According to one estimate, Alabama prisons are dangerously overcrowded and are, according to some estimates, operating at nearly 160 to 200 percent over their capacity. Such overcrowding produces misery and wanton conditions; there are multiple accounts of cells being extremely dirty and inmates having access to very limited or no cleaning supplies.

Furthermore, inmates at multiple Alabama state prison have complained of foul-smelling and tasting drinking water. One inmate told solitarywatch.com, “You can actually taste the chemicals in the water. The water looks like fog. You cannot drink it.” Moreover, solitarywatch.com has stated, there are “numerous incarcerated individuals developing stomach problems from drinking the water, which the correctional officers apparently never drink, opting to bring in bottled water by the case.”

The Free Alabama Movement writes, “The ADOC forces us to drink, bathe and wash clothes from a water supply that stinks, tastes bad, and leaves us itching and sometimes scratching after a shower. Raw sewage flowing through old pipelines almost forced Holman’s closure.”

Inmates who find themselves in solitary confinement, a de facto “prison within a prison,” confront harrowing conditions. An inmate speaking to solitarywatch.com, who has spent the last 27 months in solitary confinement, commented, “In 2001, I was the very first person in the segregation unit, and I actually cleaned the white chalk off the walls after they built this place. The buttons have never worked; they serve no purpose.”

The buttons were supposedly installed to serve as a way for an inmate in solitary confinement to communicate to a guard outside in the case of an emergency. “There is no ability to communicate emergencies with officers and staff without kicking on the door, screaming and hollering, making as much noise as you can so someone will come out of the cube and assist you.”



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