

Hunger strike at Wisconsin's Waupun State Prison against conditions of a "living hell"

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An estimated half dozen or more prisoners locked away in solitary confinement at Wisconsin's maximum security facility in Waupun, Wisconsin announced last week they would begin a hunger strike in opposition to what one inmate has described as a "living hell" in the institution's "hole."

Waupun, Wisconsin, population 11,340 at the 2010 census, is located 55 miles northeast of Madison. It is notoriously known as "the Prison City," with three state prisons inside the city limits, all but bordering one another. The state prisons constitute the small city's chief employer, dwarfing other small businesses, including a modest-sized cheese factory.

Waupun Correctional Institution (WCI), today designated as a maximum-security facility, was built in 1851 and as of this month houses 1,236 men in a physical setup planned for no more than 882. Three blocks away sits the Dodge Correctional Institution (DCI), also a maximum-security prison, converted in 1977 from the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The DCI incarcerates 1,625 men this month at a site designed for 1,165. The John C. Burke Correctional Center (JBCC), also designated as a minimum-security unit and built in 1989, houses up to 250 male inmates and abuts the south end of the DCI.

Of the approximately 2 million human beings imprisoned in the United States, Wisconsin incarcerates 22,415 as of May 31, with another 66,439 men and women tethered to probation and parole. Needless to say, the vast majority of these people, on the state and national level, grew up in poor and working class families and neighborhoods of America. A very significant number of them entered the prison system as youth.

LaRon Mckinley Bey, one of the hunger strikers, reported to WisconsinWatch.org that he has been held in solitary confinement at Waupun prison for a quarter century. This April he filed a lawsuit against the

Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WDC), pointing to the worsening of mental illnesses for himself and the other some 116 persons in "the hole" at WCI, constituting torture and cruel and unusual punishment.

Bey reported in the lawsuit that his only human contact consists of prison guards who shackle his arms and legs while taking him to and from a shower, or to a small dog-kennel-like run to walk back and forth for what exercise he obtains.

Any "visits" he might receive are done by remote video. He and the other solitary inmates report they are never allowed outside. In his own handwritten complaint, he reported, "Many mentally ill prisoners cry and act out because they've been broken by the effects of isolation."

Another Waupun inmate named Norman C. Green, who also calls himself Prince Aturn-Ra Uhuru Mutawakkil, reports he has been in solitary for approximately 18 years, and in a 2012 blog described the isolation "as a holocaust (that) leaves the body static but alive (and) incinerates the mind and spoils the soul."

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, in his career as a Republican state legislator, led the passage of the "truth-in-sentencing law," enacted in 1999, which dramatically lengthened prison sentences, entirely doing away with early release for compliant prison behavior. As governor, Walker has declined all requests for pardon. President Bill Clinton signed and Hillary Clinton supported the 1994 federal crime bill that financed \$8.7 billion in prison building for states that enacted these draconian statutes and that so dramatically swelled the American gulag with hundreds of thousands of working class youth and the poor.

The solitary confinement cells are constructed of pale cinder block and concrete and admit minimal natural light, equipped with a small bed, a water basin and a toilet. Inmates are allowed scant personal items, and for hours and days, according to WisconsinWatch, have been

left without bedding and clothes, except perhaps a paper gown.

Inmates are very often punished by longer stays in solitary for complaining about their conditions, or for writing letters to authorities and prison advocacy groups. In 2015, the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism documented 40 instances of inmate psychological and physical abuse by prison guards, some of which were committed while prisoners were in chains. Two thirds of the complaints were directed against an apparent sadist who has been allowed, apparently at his own request, to continue “working in the hole” at Waupun since 2005, despite multiple lawsuits by inmates and their families, all of which have been dismissed by the courts.

In June of last year, the state of Wisconsin ostensibly mandated the abolishment of 360-day sentences to confinement, including for complaints about treatment, talking back to guards or possession of tobacco. For “serious” infractions, the maximum time in solitary initially was to be no more than 90 days. Any extensions of time in the “hole” of 120 days or more were to be reviewed by the secretary of the Department of Corrections. Subsequently, prison officials were discovered withholding information from the inmates as to the requirement for reduced time in solitary, and instead imposing lengthy terms in isolation in violation of the law.

As has been widely disclosed in the United States prison industry, in public and privately owned facilities, the administrations and staffs are a law unto themselves.

In 2013, the Association of State Correctional Administrators revealed that in one 12-month period there were 4,327 male prisoners held in solitary during the year, about 20 percent of the Wisconsin prison population. Fourteen inmates were kept in solitary for over ten years apiece.

Early in the last decade, the American Civil Liberties Union filed lawsuits complaining about inhumane conditions at Wisconsin’s “supermax” prison in the tiny southwestern village of Boscobel, where inmates were kept under bright lights 24 hours a day and in chilled, cold cells with scant clothing. Talib Akbar was put in solitary for a year, part of it at Boscobel, for complaining about neglect of medical needs by a prison nurse.

The 7th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 2014 that John Townsend’s imprisonment, while mentally ill and held in solitary at the Correctional Institution in Green Bay, Wisconsin “did not meet the Eighth Amendment’s

standard for the minimal civilized measures of life necessities.” In testimony, Townsend, who is suicidal and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, told the court that his sole possessions in solitary were a blanket, a smock and a book. For most of 259 days in the “hole,” he had no sheets or pillow, and that he was so cold in the tiny cell most of his days that he had to pace nonstop in an attempt to warm himself.

The court disclosed that Townsend was often denied toilet paper, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, and was compelled to live for weeks entirely naked in his cell without bedding, linen, mattress or shoes.

Another mentally ill inmate named Jiles was moved from one solitary pen to another in Green Bay, Waupun, and Columbia prisons, receiving no treatment of his illness at any the facilities, instead being administered ramped-up punishment at all of the facilities. Jiles was placed naked in empty cold cells for weeks with nothing to read, no contacts or visits or phone calls, and food limited to dirty sacks of oatmeal and jello he had to eat with his fingers.

Adding to the inmates’ desperation that has led to the hunger strike is the futility of the multiple lawsuits filed by the prisoners against these Dickensian hell holes. The Waupun maximum security unit has been the target of more litigation by inmates and their families than any other Wisconsin prison, and the suits go nowhere. William Pollard, the Waupun warden, and his guards have been sued hundreds of times for mental and physical abuse, and the state of Wisconsin court officials have consistently protected the gulag’s overseers.

In 2013, Marcus Childs filed a lawsuit against Waupun’s notoriously sadistic guard after being placed naked in a cold solitary cell and being refused a blanket. The case was dismissed in March of that year because Childs missed the deadline of filing a court-ordered document. He failed the timely filing because he had hung himself in his cell on February 21, 2013.



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