

Justice Department announces investigation into Alabama prisons as US prison strike continues

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The US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced October 7 an investigation into the overcrowded and violent conditions in the state prisons of Alabama. According to the *Washington Post*, “The investigation by the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division will focus on whether male inmates are housed in safe, secure, and sanitary conditions and protected from physical harm and sexual abuse...”

The *Post* quoted Deputy Assistant Attorney General Vanita Gupta as saying, “We hope to work cooperatively with the state of Alabama in conducting our inquiry and ensuring that the state’s facilities keep prisoners safe from harm.” Surely these lines were penned by someone at DOJ struggling to keep a straight face.

The timing of the DOJ’s announcement coincides with a nationwide strike by US prisoners against slave labor in the Alabama units and near slave labor at some 40 to 50 prisons in 24 other states across the country that began September 9. That date was chosen because it coincided with the anniversary of a 1971 uprising by prisoners at the notorious Attica prison in New York against the brutal conditions they faced.

In a national blackout, America’s corporate media has effectively censored any news of the first nationwide work stoppage in state and federal prisons in US history. The action has been organized by the prisoners themselves, with support by their families and such organizations as the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) and the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC).

As of last week, the Daily Kos web site estimated the strike was continuing in at least 12 states in about 29 prisons. But estimations are very difficult, and many

prison officials around the country have denied work stoppages or hunger strikes are going on at all, although inmates are known to have ceased work.

The William C. Holman Correctional Facility near Atmore, on Alabama’s Gulf Coast, houses 1,000 inmates even though its official capacity is just 500. It is well known as the most violent prison in Alabama, aggravated by decades of overcrowding. The unit does not have air-conditioning, and in the summer, coastal temperatures soar above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, with high humidity. The prison houses a license plate and a sewing factory where inmates work without pay.

The inmate strike organizers in most states were immediately subjected to prison lockdowns and either thrown into solitary confinement, or threatened with loss of the few privileges they have or with extended prison sentences and denial of access to parole hearings. Planning for the prison work stoppages began at least as early as last April in several states, including Alabama, Texas, and Oregon. Access to phones, the web, and social media has been very difficult for the strikers, and has been ferociously suppressed by prison authorities.

At the Red Onion State Prison in Virginia, during the early days of the strike, 17 prisoners in solitary confinement refused meals for about three weeks in support of the work stoppage. Then, prison authorities split them up and transferred them to other units, a practice which has been widespread.

Prison officials at the William P. Clements Unit in Amarillo, Texas preempted the work stoppage by putting the prison in lockdown on September 8, and according to one inmate, Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, this has continued for the duration of the national work

stoppage.

IWOC announced on its Facebook page that strike-supporting inmates at Merced County Jail in California went on hunger strike, and that the sheriff's department retaliated with violence by its Correctional Emergency Response Team (C.E.R.T.) and attack dogs.

The day after the strike began, hundreds of inmates at the Kinross Correctional Facility in Michigan reportedly returned to their cells peacefully when over a hundred guards armed with shotguns and pepper spray attacked the units. Over a hundred inmates were handcuffed, dragged from their cells, pepper sprayed, some directly in the eyes, and left outside overnight in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, during a rain storm.

Of the 2.4 million persons incarcerated in the US, some 900,000 are compelled to work for between 23 cents and \$1.15 an hour. In Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, and Alabama, prisoners are forced to work for no wages at all—in other words, they are effectively slave labor.

The vast majority of the incarcerated youth and adults in the US grew up in working class neighborhoods and come from poor families. America's epidemic of imprisonment and killings by police does not afflict inhabitants of Manhattan's luxury high-rises or residents of the Hamptons on the east end of Long Island. *Business Insider* noted this year that the 11962 zip code in the Hamptons was the location of the country's most expensive homes, which sold for an average of \$8.5 million.

Professor Heather Thompson at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor told *Mother Jones* magazine this month that "Some (work) farms in Nevada are paying (inmates) 8 cents a day," Thompson notes that the US Congress created the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP) in 1979, which provided an incentive for private businesses to use prison labor.

The first sentence at the National Correctional Industries Association website for PIECP reads, "The Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program exempts certified state and local departments of correction and other eligible entities from normal restrictions on the sale of offender-made goods in interstate commerce." In other words the reforms workers struggled for in earlier periods can be abandoned.

Thompson also notes that, "Historically, prison labor

has been the one thing that tends to really bring prisoners together."

The state of Texas ranks first in the US in the number of prisons, the number incarcerated, and the number of executed persons. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) imprisoned 146,843 persons at 109 facilities as of July 31 this year, according to the *Dallas Morning News* website. Some 10,464 persons are imprisoned in privately owned units. And about 12,500 inmates are female.

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Prof. Thompson noted, "Texas is one of the largest and most brutal prison systems in the nation, rivaled by states such as Louisiana, but not just Southern states. Northern states and Western states have the exact same brutal conditions."

She also noted that, "there has been a wholesale abandonment of the idea that prisoners deserve any good treatment behind bars. In Texas, for example, prisoners are literally locked in cages longer and longer than they have ever been, with no time out of the cell. It's sweltering, of course, because it's Texas. It's hundreds of degrees in these cement cages. They're serving horrendous time in solitary ... mistreated with lack of food (and) suffering lack of medical care."

Melvin Ray of the Free Alabama Movement told ABC News from inside the William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility, "Recidivism is guaranteed in living conditions like these. If I want to smoke crack, I can smoke crack right now. But as I'm talking to you, there are 96 men on both sides of me and not a single one of them can get access to a book."

The website, buycott.com, lists 43 major US corporations that are using prison labor.



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