

Hundreds of jailed immigrants join hunger strike in Tacoma, Washington

A reporter
14 April 2017

A hunger strike of immigrant detainees in Tacoma, Washington nearly doubled in size yesterday as the number of participants rose to 750 inmates, half the capacity of the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC). The first strikers have now gone three days without food.

Immigrants are protesting horrendous conditions at the facility. They are demanding better food, better medical care, regular cleaning of prison clothes, an increase in the amount of recreation time, the establishment of education programs and anti-depression programs, an increase in pay for prison labor, and a decrease in price gauging at the prison store.

At present, immigrants at NWDC and at many locations around the country receive only one hour of outdoor recreation per day, despite the fact that many detainees have never been convicted with any criminal offense. Depression is rampant and abuse at the hands of brutal prison guards is widespread. Roughly 170 people have died in immigration custody since 2003. Immigrants at the facility make \$1 per day for prison labor.

The hunger strike marks a resurgence of protest by immigrant detainees. In 2014, 1,200 immigrants were on hunger strike at facilities across the country, including at NWDC. That year, protesters outside NWDC blocked deportation buses from entering or leaving the facility. Hunger strikes of women detainees broke out in April 2014 at the Karnes County Family Detention Center in Texas, and 500 more women went on a hunger strike at the T. Don Hutto facility in Texas. Similar protests have taken place in California, Louisiana, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Colorado.

Jonathan Rodriguez Guzman, a young hunger striker at NWDC, told the press the strike is “for everybody

out there” and that “what we want is for people to hear us out” on deplorable conditions in the facility.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesperson Rose Richeson tried to downplay the strike in an interview with Reuters: “Right now it’s more of a meal refusal thing that some detainees have done.”

NWDC is a privately run, for-profit detention center owned by GEO Group, a corporation whose CEO donated \$250,000 to fund Donald Trump’s January inauguration celebration. GEO Group’s stock has doubled from \$23 per share on Election Day to \$48 at yesterday’s closing bell.

The corporation has further reason to celebrate. A memo released by the *Washington Post* yesterday shows the Department of Homeland Security will be expanding the number of detention spots by 33,000 in the near future.

The company announced that ICE awarded it a \$110 million contract to operate a 1,000 bed detention center in Conroe, Texas. According to Yahoo Finance, the project is expected to generate \$44 million in revenue each year.

“We are very appreciative of the continued confidence placed in our company by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,” said George C. Zoley, GEO Group’s CEO. “We are pleased to have been able to build on our longstanding partnership with ICE to help the agency meet its need for detention beds.”

GEO Group makes vast profits from human misery and oppression, operating 143 prisons worldwide, jailing up to 100,000 people every day.

In March, the company announced a public stock offering of 6,000,000 shares at \$41.75 per share, which would bring in \$250 million. According to a Berkshire Hathaway report from March 8, “JP Morgan, SunTrust Robinson Humphrey, Barclays, and BofA Merrill

Lynch are acting as joint book-running managers for the offering.”

The government pays GEO Group roughly \$150 per day for each prisoner. Yesterday, dozens of protesters gathered outside of the GEO Group facility in Tacoma and demanded the release of their family members.

Augustino Lucas, a 15-year-old, told the *Stranger* that his father, Francisco, is among those currently detained. “Everything changed” when ICE officials took his father.

Ashlee, a 12-year-old, explained that her father was also detained at the facility, where guards denied him medical attention. “My dad was hard-working,” she said. “He would always make me laugh and smile.”

Maru Mora Villalpando, an organizer with the protest group NWDC Resistance, told the *Stranger*: “If anybody is asking themselves if we need this place, whether we should deport people or detain people this way, they should take a look at themselves and their humanity. Because maybe they lost it.”



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