

Mounting outrage in US over conditions facing detained immigrants

Patrick Martin
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Hunger strikes at two US immigrant detention facilities, as well as lawsuits and press reports, are exposing the appalling conditions in which immigrants and refugees are being held under the Trump administration.

These exposures come as the July 26 deadline approaches for the Department of Homeland Security to reunite 3,000 children and their parents, as ordered by a federal judge in California. Fewer than 500 children have so far been returned to their parents, and it is widely expected that the Trump administration will fail to meet the deadline for most of those who remain.

At least 60 detainees went on hunger strike last week at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, near the city of Bristol. They began refusing food on Tuesday, July 17, protesting conditions that included “nearly nonexistent medical care, inedible food, abuse from facility employees, and exorbitant commissary prices,” according to a posting on social media by Families for Freedom, a support group.

Families for Freedom claimed that the hunger strike continued into the weekend and spread to a second unit of the jail, expanding to 130 detainees. The Bristol County Sheriff’s office, which runs the detention center for the federal immigration agency, claimed it ended Thursday after staff members met with prisoners to discuss their concerns.

Families for Freedom said it did not organize the hunger strike, only learning of it through detainees’ phone calls to relatives and friends. “This was something that they informed us about,” a spokeswoman said. “We’re just supporting them in making their strike visible to the outside world.”

The Massachusetts action came on the heels of a similar protest on the opposite side of the country, as

nearly 200 detainees at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Washington staged a three-day hunger strike beginning Saturday, July 14 and ending Monday, July 17.

The protest was carried out in support of immigrant parents and children who have been separated under the Trump administration’s infamous “zero tolerance” policy, instituted in early May, under which some 3,000 children have been taken from their parents, most of whom are imprisoned.

According to a statement by NWDC Resistance, a support group for the detainees, “The people detained in the NWDC are appalled by what has been done to parents and their children at the border. They want those families released immediately from detention and reunited, and then all the parents detained at the NWDC released.”

GEO Group, a private for-profit corporation, operates the detention center for ICE. The agency has a policy requiring medical evaluation of hunger strikers after three days, which explains why the protests have been set by the detainees as three-day events. The prisoners clearly wish to avoid such medical intervention, which could lead to force-feeding or other punitive measures.

The 1,500 prisoners at NWDC, one of the largest detention centers operated for ICE around the country, have engaged in numerous hunger strikes in past years to protest food and other conditions of life, lack of contact visits, delays in hearings and low wages for the labor they are compelled to perform.

Press reports and lawsuits charge that detainees have been placed in solitary confinement or beaten by guards in retaliation for their participating in hunger strikes or filing complaints against poor conditions and mistreatment. Last year, Washington state sued GEO Group for violating the state’s minimum wage law by

paying detainees as little as \$1 a day, or even giving them only snacks in return for labor.

The conditions at the Dartmouth, Massachusetts detention center may be even more brutal. According to a report last week in *The Intercept*, guards at the center tried to pit prisoners against each other in fights, on which they would bet. When one detainee refused to fight for the pleasure of the guards and tried to file a complaint, he was told, “No one will believe baboon complaints.” From then on, the prisoner was systematically brutalized and denied access to hygiene and food.

A report by the group Freedom for Immigrants found at least 800 complaints of abuse by guards at 34 immigration detention facilities since Trump entered the White House. Such attacks took place regularly under the Obama administration as well, but Trump’s demonization of immigrants has encouraged the most fascist elements in ICE, the border patrol and their contracting companies.

Reports of these conditions have triggered lawsuits and official investigations in several states. In Oregon, for example, federal public defenders filed a report July 20 describing conditions for 120 asylum seekers at a prison in the rural town of Sheridan. The report listed poor food and overcrowded cells with open toilets, as well as strip searches and other forms of routinized brutality. The detainees arrived at the prison in late May with only a day’s notice given to officials, as part of the Trump administration’s crackdown on asylum seekers.

“We are dying day by day inside here,” one detainee told investigators, according to the suit filed in federal court in Portland. The immigrant asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation. Another detainee said, “Here we have come to save our lives, but I think we will die here in jail.”

Federal Public Defender Lisa Hay said in a letter to Warden Josaias Salazar and Acting ICE Field Office Director Elizabeth Godfrey that there was at least one suicide attempt and many other detainees said they had considered killing themselves. Hay’s office sought federal court hearings for five detainees, whose names were redacted for their own safety.

In a second letter, Hay wrote that some conditions have improved, “but continue to fall below the minimum standards set by our government for

immigration detention and, in my view, violate the Constitution by imposing punitive detention on civil detainees.”

Lawsuits on behalf of immigrants held in private prisons run by GEO Group and CoreCivic have brought to light the regular practice of \$1-a-day work programs, in what amounts to thinly disguised slave labor in the United States. According to a report July 21 in the *Wall Street Journal*, Geo Group and CoreCivic are accused of “violating federal laws prohibiting forced labor, state minimum-wage laws or unjust-enrichment laws.”

The defense mounted by the companies, the two biggest private prison operators in the US, is that migrants work voluntarily, that the \$1-a-day rate is set by Congress, and that the companies “meet our contractual obligations.” ICE documents declare that the “decreased idleness” of prisoners eases the “negative impact of confinement.”

GEO Group is now appealing to the US Supreme Court a ruling by the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver that allows nine detainees at the company’s huge detention center in Aurora, Colorado to represent 60,000 other detainees who have passed through the facility over the years. The company has threatened that if it has to pay detainees the minimum wage it will have to charge the government more to run the facility.

An exposure of conditions at a shelter for detainee children in Illinois by the *Washington Post* has now triggered investigations by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the inspector general of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The *Post* reported July 15 that at Casa Guadalupe, in the Chicago suburbs, children between 9 and 11 years old had been roughed up and then denied medical attention for injuries, and injections had been given to children when they were unruly.



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