

Brutal conditions in US prisons drive inmates to strike

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Prisoners incarcerated at various state and federal correctional facilities across the United States began a 19-day strike Tuesday to protest the inhumane living conditions imposed upon them, the slavery-like work regimes they are forced to labor under, and the reactionary sentencing laws that strip away their constitutional rights and prevent them from challenging in court the conditions of their confinement.

The strike, which is being spearheaded by an intra-prison organization known as Jailhouse Lawyers Speak, was called in response to the recent riot at Lee correctional institution in South Carolina where 7 inmates were killed and another 17 injured. At the prison, which is notorious for its overcrowding and brutality, the correctional staff allowed the violence to continue for hours and left injured inmates untreated.

First among the actions called for by the inmates are work strikes. Prisons in the United States typically have two different forms of employment. First are institutional jobs, such as working in the kitchen, laundry, or performing janitorial work. Second are “industry” jobs, in which prisoners work in on-site workshops that produce manufactured goods for businesses that have a contract with the prison system.

Wages for this work vary across the prison system. For institutional jobs, in many states, prisoners are paid nothing for their labor. In other prisons, inmates are paid a flat rate, usually equal to no more than a dollar a day, at the very most. Industry jobs are often paid by the hour, with wages starting as low as 20 cents per hour.

In the federal prison system, wages for institutional jobs range from 12 cents to 40 cents per hour, for a seven-hour minimum workday. Federal industry jobs start at 23 cents per hour and top out at \$1.15 per hour.

In most prisons, inmates are required to work. Those who refuse are placed in solitary confinement, known in institutional parlance as “administrative segregation,” where an individual is confined to his or her cell for 23 hours a day and kept isolated from other convicts. Due to the impoverished background of most inmates, whose only other source of income is money sent to the prison by family or friends, this work is the only source of income to procure necessities such as postage stamps, writing materials, and items from the prison commissary to supplement the inadequate and low-quality food

prisoners are forced to eat.

Because of the compulsory nature of this arrangement, modern prison labor in the US can rightfully be labeled modern-day slavery. The second demand of the prisoners pointedly addresses this, calling for “An immediate end to prison slavery. All persons imprisoned in any place of detention under United States jurisdiction must be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor.”

The striking prisoners have also called for sit-ins, hunger strikes and a boycott on spending inmate money. Within the prison system, telephone calls, commissary foods, and other services are outsourced to contractors who are then allowed to charge exorbitant rates for their services. A 15-minute phone call in the Kentucky state prison system, for example, costs an inmate and his family \$5.70. The prison then typically receives a substantial financial kick-back from the contractor.

This fraudulent price gouging is a universal feature of US prisons.

The third and fourth demands advanced by the inmates call for the abolition of the Prison Litigation Reform Act as well as the Truth in Sentencing and The Sentencing Reform Act. The first piece of legislation, passed by Congress in 1996, greatly restricts the ability of inmates to seek relief within the court system for violations of their constitutional rights. It requires inmates to prove that they have exhausted all “administrative” remedies—internal panels of prison guards empowered to rule on inmate grievances—before they can file suit against the prison system. Because these kangaroo courts operate without external oversight and are staffed by the same individuals charged with violating the inmate’s rights in the first place, it is virtually impossible for an inmate whose rights have been violated to seek justice.

The Sentencing Reform Act abolished parole for federal prisoners, compelling them to serve at least 85 percent of their sentences. The Truth in Sentencing laws includes a variety of measures passed by state legislatures, which include mandated sentences for certain crimes, restrictions on parole for various crimes, and other repressive measures. California’s notorious “three strikes” law, requiring a life sentence for a third conviction, even for a minor crime, is the most well-known of these laws.

These laws were passed with bipartisan support in the 1980s and 1990s. Under both Democratic and Republican administrations, legislators sought to boost their credentials as being “tough on crime” at the expense of the millions of poor workers who saw their living standards collapse in the wake of the shift in the US economy away from manufacturing and the abandonment of the class struggle by the trade unions.

As millions of jobs disappeared, crime rates spiked, largely fueled by a massive influx of cocaine imported into the US by drug cartels allied with right-wing Latin American regimes supported by the CIA and the Pentagon. The legislation passed by Congress caused the prison population to swell rapidly, doubling in the 1990s. Much of the legislation deliberately targeted the black population, particularly the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which set mandatory minimum sentences for cocaine-related convictions.

The key provision in that law set the mandatory sentence for possession of crack cocaine, which plagued black neighborhoods in the 1980s, at 100 times that for powder cocaine, more common among white users. The result of that and other discriminatory laws has seen the incarceration of African Americans, already disproportionate, rise to approximately 37 percent of the prison population. In comparison, African Americans make up 13 percent of the US population as a whole.

Two of the inmates’ demands directly address this. Demand five calls for “An immediate end to the racial overcharging, over sentencing, and parole denials of Black and brown humans. Black humans shall no longer be denied parole because the victim of the crime was white, which is a particular problem in southern states.” Demand six calls for “an immediate end to racist gang enhancement laws targeting black and brown humans.”

The gang enhancement laws referenced set increased penalties for crimes if the individual convicted can be proven to be a member of a gang. New inmates are often encouraged to identify which street gang they belong to upon entering prison, so they can avoid being housed in units with rival gangs. This is one of the primary means by which prison officials maintain de facto segregation among the inmates and prevent them from taking unified action in their common interest.

Demands seven through nine call for inmates convicted of violent crimes to not be denied access to rehabilitation programs, for states to increase funding for rehabilitation programs, and for inmates to be allowed access to Pell grants so as to be able to pursue college degrees.

Amidst the frenzy of anti-crime legislation passed over the last 40 years, most states gutted various educational programs offered in prisons. This was typically justified as a means to cut state and federal budget deficits, which were caused by the slashing of taxes on corporations and the wealthy over the same period.

The final demand reads: “The voting rights of all confined

citizens serving prison sentences, pre-trial detainees, and so-called ‘ex-felons’ must be counted. Representation is demanded. All voices count!”

The United States has the largest prison population in the world, both in total numbers and as a percentage of the population. With 716 out of every 100,000 individuals incarcerated, the US prison population accounts for 22 percent of the global prison population.

It is unknown how many of the 2.3 million incarcerated individuals currently inside US jails and prisons will participate in the strike.

The dates chosen for the beginning and end of the strike are symbolic. On August 21, 1971, imprisoned Black Panther George Jackson was murdered by correctional staff at San Quentin prison in California after allegedly staging an escape attempt. On September 9 of that same year, inmates at Attica state prison in New York staged an uprising in opposition to the brutal conditions they faced. Their rebellion was crushed four days later by the state police under orders of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, ending with 29 inmates killed by police.

At that time, as today, millions of workers around the world were engaged in protests, strikes and other militant actions in opposition to US imperialism and the capitalist system as a whole. This found expression, albeit in an elementary and distorted form, in the uprising of the inmates at San Quentin, Attica and other prisons.

Today, as prison conditions have become unbearable, inmates in the United States, who find only enemies within the capitalist two-party system, have once again been compelled to take action to end the brutal conditions they suffer under.

Inmates, their families, and supporters must be warned: Though the struggle you have launched is necessary and brave, it is doomed to failure if it is confined to demands for reform within the prison system aimed at bourgeois politicians. The grotesque conditions that have driven you to strike are the result of the decaying capitalist profit system, which seeks to prop itself up through the ever-greater exploitation of the working class. The especially repressive state of affairs in US prisons is a concentrated expression of this reality.

No true reform is possible under capitalism. Only the mass mobilization of the working class, aimed at the destruction of the profit system and its replacement with a socialist workers’ state, can set the conditions for the abolition of the police-state laws that have incarcerated millions.



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