

Over a thousand federal inmates in New York City jail held for more than a week in dark, frigid conditions

Philip Guelpa
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Over 1,600 inmates at the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn have been without heat and hot water, and with limited electricity and communications for a week.

A fire at the federal jail on January 27 left the inmates, most of whom have not been convicted but are awaiting trial, in the cold and near darkness during a period in which New York City experienced record cold temperatures as low as 2 degrees Fahrenheit (-17 Celsius) due to the Polar Vortex weather pattern which claimed the lives of nearly two dozen people across the US last week.

Reports indicate that the temperature inside the federal detention center's housing units have dipped to 34 degrees (1 Celsius). Prisoners have resorted to banging on their cell windows, flashing lights and screaming "We're freezing!" and "No hot food, no hot water!" in order to alert the outside world of their situation.

"They're really, really scared," Rachel Bass, a paralegal at the Brooklyn federal defenders office, told the *New York Times* on Thursday after she had spoken to 15 inmates by phone. "They don't have extra blankets. They don't have access to the commissary to buy an extra sweatshirt."

Problems at the facility may have begun as early as January 5, according to the president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which represents the prison guards. Apparently unrelated failures of both the electrical and heating systems combined to create catastrophic conditions. Guards and other jail employees have been compelled to work clothed in winter coats, hats, and scarves.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) claimed, in a

statement emailed to the media Sunday, that "Cells have heat and hot water, there is lighting in the common areas and inmates are receiving hot meals." However, other reports appear to contradict that assessment. MDC officials initially attempted to blame the local utility, Con Edison, for the electrical problems, a claim that was firmly denied by the utility.

Communications by inmates with the outside have been extremely limited—restricted to one dedicated phone line to Federal Defenders, a non-profit legal aid organization. Inmates represented by other attorneys are effectively incommunicado. Access to the internet, a main means of contacting lawyers and family, is unavailable. No outside visitors, including attorneys and family members, are permitted to enter the facility, making independent verification of conditions virtually impossible. Packages from friends and relatives are not being accepted.

The fragmentary information that is available indicates that the inmates are locked in their dimly lit cells, huddled in their beds, without extra blankets or cold weather clothing. Reports regarding access to food and medical care are contradictory. Some inmates are running low on necessary medications. A number of lawsuits have been filed on behalf of inmates asking for redress of inhumane and life-threatening conditions.

On Sunday, protestors, including inmates' family members, attempted to gain access to the jail, but were driven back by prison guards using pepper spray. Demonstrators, who had been there since Saturday, chanted "Heat is a human right!"

The BOP issued a statement on Saturday that they expect electricity to be restored on Monday, over a week after the fire cut power.

Inmates could have been moved to an adjacent, minimally occupied building, also part of the jail, which was fully functional.

In a totally hypocritical, grandstanding move one week after critical conditions at MDC began, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a statement on Saturday that “New York City is sending trucks with hundreds of blankets and hand warmers to the Metropolitan Detention Center NOW and generators are being readied for transport. We’ve told the Federal Bureau of Prisons the supplies are coming – whether they like it or not.”

This from a mayor under whose administration thousands of residents of the city’s public housing system have gone weeks, months, and even years without heat and hot water.

The lack of effective backup systems or emergency contingency plans to provide minimally humane conditions for the inmates at MDC, many of whom may ultimately be convicted of no crime, is of a piece with the brutal treatment of migrants at the border and in detention centers across the country by the same federal government. The prevalence of such deplorable conditions highlights the utter disregard for the lives and basic democratic rights of the working class under capitalism.



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