

Florida teen hangs himself in Broward County maximum-security jail

Casey Gold
9 September 2019

In the early morning on Sunday, September 1, guards at the Broward County Main Jail in Fort Lauderdale, Florida found 17-year-old Sonny Rugani hanging in his jail cell. The teen was taken to a hospital and kept on life support until being pronounced dead on Wednesday, September 4.

Rugani, a Coral Springs High School sophomore, had been held at the Main Jail since June 25, when the Broward State Attorney's Office charged him as an adult for allegedly stealing a firearm. At the time of his arrest at his home in June, Rugani told the arresting officers that he planned to hang himself in prison.

Rugani's threat on his life triggered his detention under the Florida Mental Health Act of 1971, commonly known as the Baker Act, which permits the nonconsensual detainment and commitment to mental health treatment of individuals who may "inflict harm to themselves or others." After being held in a mental health facility for two weeks, Rugani was released to a jail for juveniles until his transfer to the Main Jail, where he was held without bond.

According to a statement released by the Broward County Sheriff's Office, Rugani was placed under "observation" at the Main Jail for two days because of his previous threat on his life. Rugani then lived "normally" among the jail population until he was found hanging in his cell.

Broward Main Jail is an eight-story maximum security facility located in downtown Fort Lauderdale, a major metropolitan area in South Florida. The jail has the capacity to hold 1,538 victims of the capitalist criminal "justice" system in southern Florida, a significant increase from the 860 it was intended to hold when built in 1985. At that time, the construction of the detention center cost Broward County \$41.6 million.

While Broward County cannot boast low recidivism rates or humane facilities, the Sheriff's Office has highlighted the county's annual savings of about \$1 million in labor costs for neighborhood and community-wide improvement projects because of the department's inmate work programs.

Rugani's suicide at Broward County Main Jail is one among many atrocities that have occurred recently at the massive detention center. Last year, a 32-year-old man held in solitary confinement at the jail mutilated himself, cutting off his penis. Equally disturbing, in April, a mentally ill, pregnant woman was left to give birth alone in her jail cell, despite her calls for help.

On June 1, Craig Fahner died in his jail cell while his cries for medical attention were ignored, and on June 7, Joseph St. Fleur died in a cell while awaiting his release to a hospital, which a judge had ordered on May 1. St. Fleur had not been transferred due to a lack of available hospital beds.

Following these consecutive deaths in June, a Broward public defender requested that the Broward Sheriff's Office investigate the holding of inmates with health issues at their facilities. The Sheriff's Office, predictably, found that there was no neglect or misconduct on the part of the facility staff and a few employees who provided health care were fired.

From the perspective of the Broward County Sheriff's Office and the ruling elite that empowers it, there truly was no negligence in the incidents at Broward Main Jail. The very purpose of detainment facilities is to brutalize members of working class and the most vulnerable members of society who do not comply with their rules.

The horrors at Broward County Main Jail will not cease by giving more money to the facility. From the last fiscal year, the funding to operate the Main Jail

increased by more than \$1.3 million, totaling \$42,369,920 in the Broward County Sheriff's Office's most recent budget.

The budget states: "[The jail's] mission is to maintain a safe, secure, clean facility and humane environment. They will provide quality housing and services for the inmates assigned to their care." If the current environment at the Main Jail satisfies the county's definition of "humane," then it is clear that this facility, the Broward County Sheriff's Office, and the government in Broward that supports the Sheriff's Office are all beyond reform.

All of the tragic events at Main Jail were completely avoidable. There is no sensible explanation for a jail holding inmates considered "violent or dangerous" to "also include an average of 65 juveniles awaiting trial in adult courts." It is equally senseless that juveniles and mentally or physically ill individuals are detained at all, never mind their being detained and left unattended for extended periods.

These developments are not isolated or random. Just 60 miles south of Fort Lauderdale, the privately operated Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children is set to reopen following the 2019 hurricane season. Before being evacuated in August, the facility held more than 3,000 children. There have been numerous reports of unsanitary and inhumane conditions at the facility, as well as complaints of sexual abuse and extortion of the children by the facility's staff.

People will continue to suffer and die in detainment facilities like Broward County Main Jail and the Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children under the present economic and political system, in which America's jails and prison have nothing to do with rehabilitation, but rather are brutal detention facilities that meet out harsh treatment, placing the safety, health and lives of those imprisoned in danger.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact