

“No one wants to die in jail”

Immigrants at New Jersey ICE detention center launch hunger strike over COVID-19 threat

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Immigrant workers detained at the Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark, New Jersey, are conducting a hunger strike to protest squalid conditions that greatly increase the chances that they will contract the coronavirus and to demand that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) release them.

Detainees began their strike on Tuesday, and an entire unit at the jail was participating by the next day. The Essex County Correctional Facility can house as many as 928 male detainees and has had a service agreement with ICE since 2010.

“We are asking our fellow brothers in ICE to join us,” the workers said in a statement announcing the hunger strike. “We are also asking the kitchen workers that work in the main kitchen downstairs to not go to work. The point of this is to ask for release. Releasing meaning on bond, bracelet, or the people with final deportation orders that actually want to be deported get them on their plane ASAP.

“This coronavirus is getting out of control ... and if we were to be infected, I am sure everyone would rather die on the outside with our families than in here. ... We are here on a civil matter—not criminal. We shouldn’t have to stay locked up during ... processing [a] deadly pandemic. I hope you will join us because there is power in numbers and this is a fight not only for our freedom but also for our health and safety.”

ICE guidelines indicate that detainees who refuse food for “a long period are to be restrained and force fed through nasal tubes.” On the day after the hunger strike began, the agency announced that it would limit arrests around the US, but not end them.

On Friday, seven ICE detainees in the Bergen, Hudson and Essex county jails in New Jersey filed a suit in the southern district of New York against several prominent federal officials including Thomas Decker, field office director of ICE’s New York City office, and Chad Wolf, acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The plaintiffs, the suit says, suffer from a variety of ailments that put them at a higher risk for COVID-19 infection, including kidney, lung and liver conditions as well as diabetes. They are demanding to be released.

Attorney Suchita Mathur of the Bronx Defenders immigration team told the media: “The simplest and only humane way that ICE can help prevent the impending coronavirus disaster from harming people in their custody is by releasing everyone in their jails back to their families while they await their hearings.

“What we are asking is that the courts act now to force ICE to begin with the bare minimum, and most urgent act, which is to put the most vulnerable people out of harm’s way before it’s too late.”

Conditions at the Essex County Correctional Facility have been atrocious for years, and they have been a matter of public record as well. During an unannounced inspection in 2018, the DHS’s Office of Inspector General observed staff serving detainees spoiled, foul-smelling meat. Unused bread was stored in trash bags so that it could be made, much later, into bread pudding. Inspectors reported that every building that housed detainees had a leak and that mold stretched from the showers into the hallways. The jail did not provide detainees with opportunities for outdoor

recreation or even with a pillow. ICE conducts weekly inspections of the facility and tacitly endorses conditions that, according to the United Nations, constitute torture.

Benny Munoz, one of the detainees, was sent to the jail after he had completed a sentence for possessing a weapon and hindering apprehension. “A lot of guys—they’re done with their time, they’re finished paying off whatever their debt was to society, and we’re here being held against our will by the government and Immigration, it’s crazy,” he told *Gothamist*. “They could let us go home on bail, and we could fight our case from the streets. ... No one wants to die in jail.”

The Essex County facility is not the only jail where immigrant workers are detained in New Jersey and New York under unconscionably bad conditions that can facilitate the spread of the pandemic. Detainees at Hudson County Correctional Facility in Kearny, New Jersey, have reported being denied soap and hand sanitizer. One detainee was abruptly transferred to an obviously dirty cell and instructed to limit the number of times he flushes the toilet. Another detainee told his wife that the staff would not let him take regular showers. Furthermore, the jail does not provide a way for detainees to call for medical attention. Staff ask detainees whether they have complaints, jot down their answers, then lay the paper aside without following up.

An ICE detainee at Bergen County Jail, in Hackensack, New Jersey, said that although jail staff have access to Lysol and bleach, detainees are given only watered-down hand soap. The wife of another detainee said that the detainees in an entire unit (i.e., 30 people) were put into solitary confinement “until the coronavirus is under control.” An outbreak has already begun at the jail, where an official tested positive for coronavirus and has entered isolation. Seven other officers were asked to quarantine themselves.

Conditions are similar in the Orange County Jail in Goshen, New York, where ICE detainees are held. Officials at the jail consider hand sanitizer to be contraband and forbid detainees to have it. Jail staff have hand sanitizer, however, and one officer reportedly taunted inmates about it. One detainee and his wife reported that new prisoners are brought to cells and told that they are not allowed to leave them for a week.

These outrageous conditions show a pattern of neglect and abuse that has endured for years with official approval. The jails are now exposing immigrant detainees, staff and the broader community to the risk of infection and death during the worst infectious disease crisis since the AIDS pandemic began in the 1980s. These are the same policies inflicted on immigrants and asylum seekers who have been held in overcrowded and dirty concentration camps at the border between the United States and Mexico. The capitalist state is unwilling to expend the most basic efforts to protect the health of its prisoners. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, this unwillingness is likely to turn a public health emergency into a catastrophe.



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