

Growing protests in US immigrant detention centers over coronavirus pandemic

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More than 150 immigrants held at the York County Prison detention center in Pennsylvania have started a hunger strike demanding immediate release amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The strike, first reported by the Movement of Immigration Leaders in Pennsylvania, is part of a growing movement across detention centers around the country. As reported last week, 350 immigrants held in the Stewart Detention Center in southwest Georgia have been on a hunger strike since last Thursday demanding better protection against the pandemic.

The situation prevailing in these centers has long been breeding grounds for public health disasters. Last year, a mumps outbreak that started at a Texas immigration detention center quickly surged through the system, sickening nearly 1,000 migrants in 57 facilities across the country. During that outbreak, an entire wing at the York County Prison had to be quarantined for two months.

At this point, the Trump administration has only acknowledged two cases of adults held in a New Jersey detention center, five Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) employees in three different states, and three children under the protection of the Office of Refugee Resettlement as testing positive for COVID-19. However, given the nature of the pandemic as well as the highly unsanitary conditions prevailing in the world's largest network of immigration detention centers, these numbers do not fool anyone, least of all the detainees themselves.

Phoebe Lytle, a law student volunteer who has spoken with detainees at ICE facilities in Louisiana, told the *Guardian*, "People are terrified for their lives and think that they're going to die there. ... I don't think anyone is saying it in a light or flippant way." Jaclyn Cole, a volunteer for the Southern Poverty Law

Center, was quoted in the same report as hearing 10 to 15 shots during a 10-minute phone call with a Cuban detainee being held at the Pine Prairie Processing Center. Cole was informed that guards had been shooting rubber bullets and using chemical agents against protesting detainees.

In the past week alone, according to government documents obtained by *Buzzfeed*, guards have used force to quell detainee protests over COVID-19 fears at least four times. The incidents mentioned in the documents took place in three ICE detention facilities in Louisiana and Texas—LaSalle ICE Processing Center, Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center, and South Texas ICE Processing Center.

Last Wednesday, ICE medical officials, along with representatives of the Geo Group, the private contractor which runs the center, held a meeting about COVID-19 at the LaSalle Processing Center. The meeting soon descended into chaos with about 75 protesting detainees being pepper-sprayed by the guards. ICE spokesperson Brian Cox confirmed the incident, claiming that the use of force was necessitated by protesting detainees who "refused to comply with directives from facility staff," and four of whom "attempted to force their way out of the housing area."

Similar statements have been made about other incidents as well—the use of "pepper balls" against 23 detainees in LaSalle, the use of pepper spray against "physically combative" detainees in Pine Prairie, and the use of force against the 60 detainees in South Texas who told guards they would "continue their protest until they were released from custody."

Each of these actions has been justified by ICE and its private contractors as necessary measures against "actions that compromised the security protocols of the facility." However, the point being made by the

detainees is precisely that none of the protocols actually in place will secure them against the spread of the coronavirus. As Alexandra Seo, whose mother is being held at LaSalle, told *Buzzfeed*, “They are freaking out about it. ... She is saying ‘help her,’ she is begging for help.”

Dr. Sirous Asgari, an Iranian scientist, who is being held in the ICE holding facility in Alexandria, Louisiana, spoke at length to the *Guardian* about the “inhumane conditions” prevailing in filthy and overcrowded centers. His case is a perfect illustration of the sheer disregard for any legal norms that governs this administration’s treatment of immigrants.

In 2017, Dr. Asgari, who has a Ph.D. in materials engineering from Drexel University, and his wife arrived in the US with valid visas. Their two children live in America. Shortly after arriving, he discovered that he was being prosecuted by the US government for alleged violations of sanctions law. Charged with stealing trade secrets related to his academic work with a university in Ohio, Dr. Asgari was fully exonerated in a trial that concluded five months ago.

However, the Trump administration revoked his original visa when he was initially charged, and then, in a Kafkaesque scenario, this was given by US immigration officials as an excuse to detain him even after his acquittal. After arriving at the Alexandria Staging Facility (ASF) on March 10, Dr. Asgari has been seeking to “self-deport” to Iran, but ICE has refused to let him leave the country or be reunited with his family in the US.

ASF is meant to be a final transit stop where detainees are to be held no longer than 72 hours before being deported. However, because of the general travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 400-bed facility is holding people for days on end and bringing in more people who might have been exposed to the virus. The overcrowded facility, Dr. Asgari said, provides no hand sanitizer or face masks. Despite having brought his own face mask, since he has a history of serious respiratory illness, he was prevented from using it.

Detainees have been forced to clean their own living spaces and toilets with the limited cleaning supplies they are given and often must wear the same clothes they have travelled in since there are no laundry facilities. Of course, social distancing is impossible to

practice in a space where 100 people are often crammed into bunk beds placed in a single pod.

Dr. Asgari reported that his pod had only six showers for all the inmates, which made it impossible for people to maintain basic hygiene. In addition, ASF also kept the detainees on a very limited diet, providing only one hot meal a day at 5 p.m., and two small meals at breakfast and lunch. There was no option for people to buy more food, even if they could afford it.

As Dr. Asgari put it, “The way ICE looks at these people is not like they are human beings, but are objects to get rid of. ... The way that they have been treating us is absolutely terrifying. I don’t think many people in the US know what is happening inside this black box.”

The protests by detainees in recent days is a desperate attempt to open up the black box. To continue running these detention centers at a time when the coronavirus pandemic is escalating at a dangerous pace is criminal.



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