

“[COVID-19] will turn our detentions into a death sentence”

Immigrants at US detention centers lead hunger strikes, face persecution demanding protections from pandemic

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A wave of hunger strikes and sit-in protests continue to spread throughout US immigrant detention centers across California and beyond in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The crowded facilities detain over 55,000 people and like the US prison system, are proving to be epicenters of the deadly disease.

Nearly 200 immigrants, in male and female cell blocks, are currently staging a hunger strike and sit-in at the Mesa Verde Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Processing Center in Bakersfield, California, to protest unsanitary conditions in the facility and demand their immediate release amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a fight for their lives and concern for public health and safety, the protesters urge ICE to release them from detention as soon as possible and have put forward a list of interim demands including:

- No new detainees be brought into the facility
- All staff, including kitchen staff, wear masks and gloves
- The provision of hygiene supplies like soap, sanitizers and paper towels
- Testing for COVID-19 and adequate, offsite medical care

ICE officials are denying the existence of hunger strikes at the facility, despite interviews by detainees

and lawyers validating conditions within the facilities and notifications by both men and women in different cell blocks that they are engaging in a hunger strike.

According to a press statement on Friday, Jonathan C. Moor, a spokesman for ICE, stated that “[t]here is no hunger strike occurring at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Mesa Verde Detention Facility,” referring to allegations of a strike as “disgusting false propaganda.”

Donovan Grant, a hunger striker, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* Monday that he was among 98 out of 100 male inmates in his unit who have refused to eat since breakfast on Friday, after women in a separate unit started the protest.

Grant and other detainees have remarked on the lack of sanitation and preventative measures taken to help mitigate the disease within the facility. Preventative measures such as social distancing cannot be effectively practiced by detainees since there can be upwards of 100 people in a given dorm.

A video recording compiled by the advocacy group Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity captured the reading of a petition to ICE signed by 85 Mesa Verde Detainees. The petition stated, “Many of us have underlying medical issues from asthma, diabetes, tuberculosis, and valley fever to heart issues like Ahn [detainee], who is 75 and suffered a heart attack last week. This will turn our detention into a death sentence because this pandemic requires social distancing and that is impossible in this environment.”

US immigrant detention centers are well known for their appalling conditions, lack of medical care and the

extremely close quarters. The complete disregard to any systemized and heightened measures to mitigate the disease within the facilities has created conditions for COVID-19 to spread rapidly within them. A spike in cases inside the detention centers is also a major concern for the health and safety of the public in the surrounding areas as staff and ICE agents come and go from work.

The Mesa Verde Detention Center, a private center owned and operated by the for-profit GEO Group, is one of the smaller facilities within California, holding up to 400 detainees. It is used by ICE to hold immigrants scheduled for deportation or awaiting court appointments. Recently, four medically vulnerable people being held in Mesa Verde and Yuba County Jail were released after filing a lawsuit that claimed holding them in confinement while COVID-19 was prevalent in the country violated the US Constitution.

Protests and lawsuits are breaking out in other detention centers across the state where unsanitary and cramped conditions have also created hotbeds for the virus to spread. In response to conditions and the highest reported number of COVID-19 cases in a detention center, several detainees at the Otay Mesa detention center in San Diego, California, also began hunger strikes over the weekend following revelations that at least 16 detainees and 7 staff members have tested positive for COVID-19 as of Friday afternoon.

Their protests were met with physical abuse, pepper spray and brutal retaliation from ICE agents. Audio of an attack was recorded in a call from female detainees to Pueblo Sin Fronteras, an immigrant advocacy group. The women explained that “[t]hey are coming to throw food at us like a dog, we have rights, we are not criminals.” Later in the call, through horrible and sometimes inaudible screams, women in a cell cry out, “Please help us get out. All the cells have been pepper sprayed... They are taking a girl who has mental illness... This is abuse!”

The physical repression by guards at the Otay Mesa facility follows weeks of complaints by detainees that they did not have adequate protective gear and sanitation. In order to receive face masks which had only arrived last Friday, staff distributed contracts written in English, a language which many cannot read, for detainees to sign in order to obtain them. The waiver included verbiage that they would “hold

harmless” CoreCivic and its agents and employees “from any and all claims that I may have related directly to my wearing the face mask,” in order to absolve the facility from liability that the masks provide any protection against the virus.

The pandemic threatens to engulf and overwhelm not only the detention centers, but the hospitals when detainees are brought for treatment. Dorien Ediger-Seto, a San Diego attorney with National Immigrant Justice Center, told the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, “Human beings at Otay Mesa Detention Center will die if ICE continues to detain them at current levels. These deaths are preventable, and they are unnecessary.”

The pandemic is unfolding in what were already brutal and inhuman conditions throughout the for-profit prison and migrant detention center industry. As of March 30, ICE said it had identified about 600 vulnerable detainees and released “more than 160,” as of last Tuesday. The fact that hundreds have been and are slated for release point to the fact that the detained immigrants, like so many of the two million in the US prison system, are kept for punitive and profit-driven measures and have never posed any threat to society.



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