

North Carolina prison inmates initiate hunger strike against inhumane treatment and grossly inadequate pandemic response

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Inmates at Alexander Correctional Institution, a maximum security prison in Taylorsville, North Carolina, initiated a hunger strike this month in response to abuse and inadequate medical care.

The strike came to light nearly two weeks ago after family members of one of the inmates contacted the non-profit law firm, North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services. Elizabeth Thomas, executive director of the law firm, explained to WUNC North Carolina Public Radio that prisoners were striking because “grievances are not being answered or are being delayed, sick calls are not being answered and prisoners aren’t seeing medical staff, the mail is being delayed, prisoners are infrequently allowed showers, cells are not being properly cleaned and prisoners aren’t being given cleaning supplies, prisoners are being retaliated against for filing [grievances], and prisoners are not being let out of their cells for recreation.” The WUNC report was published on February 15.

Department of Public Safety spokesperson John Bull told WUNC, “[t]here is not a coordinated, single-issue hunger strike by offenders at Alexander.” Instead, he claimed that two prisoners had separately declared that they were on a hunger strike.

However, it is unclear how many prisoners are actually involved in the hunger strike because prison officials, who exercise tight control over the flow of information, have a vested interest in limiting what the public knows about the conditions inside the prisons, a situation that has been made worse by the pandemic.

Kristie Puckett-Williams, manager for the Campaign For Smart Justice at the ACLU of North Carolina, told WUNC that it is even difficult to determine how common hunger strikes actually are.

She said, “[t]hey probably happen more often than what

we hear about,” and explained that “when a demonstration of any kind happens inside of a prison, prison officials decide to lock down that prison,” and “that means there’s very little information going in, and very little information coming out.”

According to Puckett-Williams, prison officials have intensified their mistreatment of prisoners during the pandemic.

“COVID has really given prison officials the cover that they needed to treat people inhumanely and to keep them in torturous conditions without fear of retribution,” Puckett-Williams pointed out. “Because they can claim that it’s due to COVID [and] that this needs to happen as a safety precaution.”

However, claims by prison officials that the spread of the virus is being controlled inside the prisons do not stand up to any scrutiny. The situation inside prisons is a magnified expression of the criminally negligent pandemic response of the entire US political establishment. Both Democrats and Republicans have conspired to force workers to endure endless infections and deaths, offering vaccination as the sole means by which workers can protect themselves.

The partial or total abandonment of non-pharmaceutical interventions by the ruling class, including lockdowns, masking and social distancing, has had catastrophic consequences for the population. The total number of official US fatalities from the virus is approaching 1 million, and the number of people suffering from Long COVID is far higher. Nevertheless, in coordination with the Biden administration, state governments around the country have moved rapidly this year to end mask mandates and contact tracing and to curtail infection data collection. From the point of view of the ruling class, the American population must be forced to acclimate itself to

unending mass death so that the large corporations can continue to extract surplus value from their labor.

In workplaces throughout the country, the uncontrolled spread of the virus has led to staffing shortages, and jails and prisons have been no exception to this. Moreover, the impossibility of implementing any form of social distancing in these facilities has had catastrophic consequences. In North Carolina prisons alone, 9,500 prisoners have tested positive since the beginning of the pandemic, and at least 47 have died. According to WCNC Charlotte, this amounts to an infection rate of 24 percent, which means that prisoners are four times as likely to become infected as the rest of the population.

Jails and prisons throughout the state have been forced to release inmates early due to overcrowding, but social distancing inside their walls remains essentially impossible.

The Mecklenburg County Sheriff's office, for instance, was forced to reduce its jail population after a state inspection found "significant safety concerns around staffing shortages" in late December. At the time, a quarter of the county's inmates were infected with the virus. Democratic Governor Roy Cooper has likewise released thousands of state prison inmates. However, these limited releases have largely been a face-saving measure in a situation that has been nothing short of catastrophic.

Ben Finholt, director of the Just Sentencing Project for NC Prisoner Legal Services, told WUNC that the Department of Public Safety (DPS) "is not releasing people in sufficient quantities." He insisted that "they could let 8,000 people out right now, and get them out of prison and keep the other people who they're keeping in prison safer, keep their own employees safer, but they have not chosen to do that." He also called DPS's handling of the pandemic "cruel and unusual" and disrespectful of "the human rights of the people in their care."

Instead of making any kind of meaningful attempt to stem the tide of infections in North Carolina's prisons, DPS has instead offered various incentives to incarcerated people to get booster shots, including extended television time, visits or time using electronic tablets in prisons where they are available. Prisoners who get booster shots are also prioritized for job assignments and program placements in work release programs. In essence, they are withholding programs, tools and activities that contribute to the basic wellness and sense of purpose for inmates, while simultaneously failing to protect them from

COVID-19.

Now that the ruling class has declared COVID-19 "endemic" and claimed that the pandemic is over, the situation in US prisons can be expected to worsen further. Case numbers may be declining temporarily, though official case numbers certainly represent a vast undercount of infections, but Governor Cooper, like Democratic governors around the country, has in coordination with the White House urged the easing of mask mandates throughout the state, particularly in the schools. The further relaxing of basic pandemic control measures will inevitably lead to another massive surge in infections in the coming weeks or months, unless the working class intervenes to stop it.

The claim by the political representatives of the capitalist class that the population must learn to "live with the virus" is a lie. A campaign of mass testing, contact tracing, and quarantining and the universal provision of high-quality masks along with the shutdown of schools and non-essential production with full compensation for those affected must be put in place. If deployed on a world scale, such measures could end the pandemic within weeks.

An integral part of this effort must be an adequate response to the dangers posed by uncontrolled infection in prisons and jails. Prison cells, cafeterias, and shared spaces must be properly ventilated and sanitized, and inmates must have access to adequate personal protective equipment. If prisoners do contract the virus their right to high-quality medical treatment must also be ensured. Where measures are taken to enforce social distancing, they must accommodate the needs of prisoners, including safe human interaction. Most importantly, those prisoners who are serving nonviolent sentences and test negative for the virus must be released immediately and provided with adequate financial support and housing.



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