

Immigrant detainee workers strike at California detention centers to protest low pay and hazardous conditions

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Immigrant detainee workers are on strike in at least two California immigrant prisons, after mounting violations and labor abuses, according to reports received by Northern California Public Radio Station KQED, which received information about the strike directly from detainees.

Unsafe working conditions and heinously low wages have propelled the strike. Workers, who are defined as “housing porters,” reported cleaning bathrooms and dormitories for the nominal wage of \$1 a day, despite the \$15 an hour minimum wage in California.

The two private federal immigrant detention centers in California where the strikes are occurring are operated by the GEO Group, Inc., one of the largest private prison corporations in the United States.

According to statements from detainees to KQED, the migrants in Golden State Annex in McFarland (near Bakersfield in Central California) have been striking since June 6 and in the Mesa Verde Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Processing Center in Bakersfield since April 28. They are demanding to be paid the minimum wage, as well as sanitary and safe working conditions.

Strikers at Golden State Annex noted in their statement, “We are being exploited for our labor and are being paid \$1 per day to clean the dormitories. ... Meanwhile, private prison corporations like The GEO Group receive tens of millions each year to accommodate us detained in ICE custody.”

The GEO is a sprawling international corporation raking in a revenue of \$551 million in the first quarter of 2022 and operates security facilities in the US, United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa, according to its own website.

These labor strikes are happening as California’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health, also known as Cal/OSHA, is investigating the unsanitary conditions at the Golden State Annex in McFarland due to a complaint filed by the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice last month on behalf of seven detainees. The complaint accuses GEO of maintaining unsafe facilities, with large spots of

black mold in the showers and black fibrous dust particles pushed into the dormitory’s air through HVAC vents.

Mold spores in the air can cause asthma, allergic rhinitis, eczema, respiratory infections such as bronchitis and more, according to the California Department of Health. Doctors for one of the seven detainees in the complaint, Vladimir, discovered a spot on his lung through an X-ray. He told KQED, “I am afraid because my lung has been impacted. I have problems breathing. ... The dust and mold are bad for our health, and unfortunately, we are in a place where it feels that they don’t care about our health.”

GEO has replied to the workers’ protest by denying there is a strike at either facility, telling KQED, “Choosing not to participate in a voluntary program cannot constitute a labor strike.” This claim shows the corporation’s unwillingness to even acknowledge the grievances of their exploited labor force or even the most rudimentary of workers’ rights.

While GEO is given millions of dollars from the US government to barbarically detain immigrants, they exploit the cheap labor of these immigrants and force them to return their paltry wages for basic necessities that are marked up in prison commissaries. Akin to a company store, this cycle can only be compared to forced labor.

COVID-19 has ripped through jails and prisons for migrants and non-migrants alike across the country throughout the pandemic, highlighting the disregard for human life by the ruling class. Like all the other state-run and for-profit facilities, GEO has flagrantly deprived detainees of basic safety measures during the pandemic, with more than half of all detainees at the Mesa Verde ICE Processing Facility in Bakersfield testing positive for COVID-19 in 2020 due to lack of safety measures, resulting in a class action lawsuit that earned the victims settlements, according to the *Bakersfield Californian*.

Seeking to tamp down popular anger sparked by the exposure of these conditions, President Joe Biden signed an executive order barring the Department of Justice from

renewing contracts with for-profit prisons. This resulted in private prison corporations such as GEO shifting more attention and resources to immigration detention facilities which do not fall under the ban.

The GEO and the private prison industry have spent considerable amounts of capital on politicians who enact policies that result in more immigrants getting detained and, therefore, guarantee more profits for the corporation.

According to the National Immigration Justice Center, ICE's more than 200 immigrant detention centers were given \$3 billion for maintenance by Congress in 2021. Between January 2017 and April 2020, 39 adults died in ICE custody or quickly after being released.

Prison labor is a sizeable economic force in the United States. A June 15 report by the ACLU revealed that prison workers produced \$11 billion worth of goods and services annually, with compensation ranging between a punishing 13 cents to 52 cents per hour. More than half of this wage is spent by prisoners on hygiene products and medical care. Of the prisoners polled, 70 percent said they could not afford basic necessities, and 76 percent said they work under the threat of punishment. Prison workers in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas do most of their work without any compensation at all.

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The inhuman conditions in federal prisons have also sparked a hunger strike by 80 inmates at the federal prison in Sheridan, Oregon, according to federal public defender Lisa Hay. She claims that inmates should be released due to inhumane conditions that are unconstitutional. At least six inmates have died in the Federal Correctional Institution in Sheridan since March 2020, allegedly not due to COVID-19.

The dangerous conditions forced upon immigrants and refugees, caused by the policies enacted by Democrats and Republicans and currently enforced by the Biden administration, have resulted in repeated tragedies and reflect a deep hostility to the working class. The Biden administration has continued Donald Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy and has arrested more immigrants in 2021 than any single year of the Trump presidency.

On June 27, at least 51 undocumented immigrants died crammed into a truck in 103 degree Fahrenheit temperatures in San Antonio, Texas, trying to avoid the Border Patrol and to escape the conditions of their home countries resulting from the intervention of US imperialism.

This comes just a few days after Spanish and Moroccan police took the lives of 37 refugees and injured hundreds attempting to cross the Moroccan border into the Spanish exclave of Melilla. The massacre took place right before a

NATO summit held in Madrid, where the PSOE/Podemos government demanded that NATO consider migration as a "hybrid threat," in order to justify stepped-up repression of refugees and imperialist actions in Africa.

On June 13 it was announced that the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in favor of the Biden administration's challenge of the three lower court rulings that entitled non-citizens to a potential bail hearing while waiting for their objections to deportation to be resolved. These reactionary rulings will result in countless immigrants, who are no threat to society and pose no risk of fleeing, to be trapped and incarcerated, while private corporations exploit their labor through force.

Earlier this June, Australia's Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil went to Sri Lanka to demand that President Gotabaya Rajapakse's despised regime stop desperate asylum seekers from leaving their home country, showing the anti-refugee sentiments of the ruling class in Australia.

In 2021, a record 86 million people were estimated to have been forcibly displaced from their homes, a testament to the impact of imperialism and income inequality around the world. The capitalist ruling elite in every country reacts to this reality with disregard for human rights and hostility to the working class through increased measures of oppression against immigrants and refugees.

The militarization of the US-Mexico border and the crackdown on basic human rights for immigrants do not speak to the strength of US imperialism but its weakness and desperation. The working class is an international class and must unite across capitalist borders in order to fight these atrocities and uphold the right of workers to live and work where they please, free from harassment and repression.



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