

Inmate strike spreads to all major Alabama prisons

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Responding to their mistreatment in Alabama's state prisons, including barbaric medical neglect, thousands of inmates initiated a labor strike this week. By Monday evening, work stoppages had spread through all of the state's major prisons with the group coordinating the struggle reporting that 80 percent of the prison population was refusing to do the work as cooks and cleaners, which they are typically compelled to do for no pay.

As of July 2022, more than 26,000 people were languishing in the state's incarceration system. Most prisons reported being well over capacity, leading to overcrowding and safety issues.

The strike is being coordinated by prisoner advocacy group Both Sides of the Wall, which held a demonstration Monday outside the offices of the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) in the state capital Montgomery to protest unsanitary and unsafe prisons and to demand reform of the state's regressive crime and sentencing laws.

Among the demands made by Both Sides of the Wall are sentencing and parole reforms, including a halt to life sentences for nonviolent offenses and the establishment of guaranteed parole criteria. They have also called for an oversight board to investigate possible instances of wrongful conviction.

Like many at the rally, Montgomery resident Marquetta London has incarcerated family members. "Take care of them while they're in there," she told AL.com. "They're not taking care of those prisoners like they should. They're just not doing it."

In response to the strike, the ADOC issued a statement saying that it has limited the movement of inmates and alluded to "other security measures" they refused to elaborate upon. ADOC Commissioner Jon Hamm has stated that "All facilities are operational and there have been no disruption of critical services."

A subsequent ADOC statement released Wednesday admitted that all male facilities were experiencing work stoppages to a "varying degree." The statement also reported that prisoners had been reduced to two meals per day, down from the typical three.

Inmates held at Staton Prison told family members that they were not served lunch on Monday.

Alabama's prisons are some of the worst in the United States,

and the state has faced numerous lawsuits concerning violence, overcrowding, and abusive staff. Many of the protesters outside the ADOC Monday angrily held up photos of Kastellio Vaughan, a 32-year-old Mobile County native currently held at Elmore Correctional Facility, demanding better medical treatment for him as well as answers about the state of his health.

Vaughan was arrested in 2013 for an attempted home burglary in Mobile County; he sustained gunshot wounds in his lower abdomen and was taken to a local hospital. A week later, he was released to the Mobile County Jail as he struggled to heal from damage to his bowel. He began serving a 20-year sentence in 2019.

This August, Vaughan underwent surgery to remove part of his intestine. On September 22, his sister Kassie Vaughan received a text message saying, "Get Help." The accompanying photos showed an emaciated Vaughan slumped on a dirty gurney, his eyes rolled back. His ribs and clavicles were protruding with a scar running from his sternum down past his bloated lower abdomen.

Kassie Vaughan posted these photos to Facebook alongside a less recent photo when he was healthy. She says her brother's normal weight is 200 pounds; currently, he weighs 100. When she attempted to call him, the warden had unilaterally removed her from Kastellio's contacts and would give her no updates.

The ADOC immediately went on the defensive, blaming Vaughan and saying that he had refused care after his bowel resection in August. Prison officials claim that he began requesting medical care in July, but that he asked to be released from the hospital against medical advice every time—including once on September 3, when he was readmitted with complications from the surgery.

They further claimed that they had not restricted his communication with his family, and that he had been free to contact them as he wished. Somehow, the day after Kassie's post went viral, the family was able to speak to him again. When Kassie Vaughan finally reached Kastellio, she reports that he cried and struggled to speak.

More recently, Kassie posted that Kastellio's condition was not improving; his surgical wound had opened and was dripping pus. He told her that he had not been given a

toothbrush or allowed to bathe. She says that he has vomited waste and blood.

“I don’t understand how Elmore Correctional Center can say this situation is not real,” Kassie said in her most recent post. “They have no sympathy or compassion to at least speak out on their wrong doings. My brother laid there in pain. Malnourished. Bones protruding out his body. His wound clearly open and susceptible to infection. He wasn’t recognizable as my brother. He looked lifeless...My brother didn’t deserve this. No matter the crime. He still deserved to be treated like a human being and not just a number.”

The ADOC with the support of right-wing trolls has attacked Kassie Vaughan’s Facebook posts, asserting that the photos of Kastellio were faked and that she and her family are withholding the truth from their supporters.

It is outrageous that the ADOC would accuse anyone of obfuscation. This is a prison system which has, more than once, illegally purchased drugs on the black market, and twice this year, prison officials have worked to squelch information on two botched execution attempts in the past quarter.

The execution of Joe Nathan James in July was one of the aforementioned botched executions. Prison officials first resorted to extreme lengths to keep journalists from entering the prison, and then the execution chamber. When reporters were finally admitted to the witness’ area, they waited for hours before prison officials presented an unconscious James. He was injected and pronounced dead with unusual speed—around three minutes.

An independent autopsy found evidence of multiple attempts at injection, as well as incisions that appeared to have been made before James was sedated. By all appearances, the state executioners mutilated a conscious man in an effort to inject him with lethal drugs and presented him to reporters when he was already at death’s door.

More recently, the state’s attempts to hide evidence were so obvious that Judge R. Austin Huffaker, Jr., Trump appointee on the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, ordered ADOC to supply all records and materials—including medical waste—tied to the gruesome execution.

In 2020, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) brought a lawsuit against the state, saying that the abominable conditions in its prisons violate prisoners’ constitutional rights. The DOJ cited unsanitary conditions, staff allowing inmates to be assaulted physically and sexually by other inmates, and the excessive use of force by corrections staff against inmates. The prisons are filthy, overcrowded, and outdated; many facilities are in such poor condition that it is not feasible to remodel them.

Alabama has acknowledged that its prisons “have some problems” (as Republican Governor Kay Ivey and Commissioner Hamm delicately phrase it). However, they dispute the DOJ’s claims that the rampant abuse,

overcrowding, and poor sanitation are unconstitutional.

As Governor Ivey and the state legislature are well aware, Alabama law has steadily fed the overcrowding that plagues the prisons. The state’s incarceration rate is 938 per 100,000 people. According to Vera.org, its prison population increased by 149 percent between 1983 and 2016. Meanwhile, the rate of paroles has descended steeply.

The solutions proposed by Both Sides of the Wall have been denounced by Governor Ivey. She refuses to consider doing away with habitual offender laws for nonviolent offenses. Loosening drug sentencing laws is likewise out of the question. She will not reduce the maximum juvenile sentence from its current 30 years, nor will she support the establishment of a conviction integrity board.

Ivey has said that these demands are “unreasonable” and “unwanted in the State of Alabama.” She compared them to setting serial killers and violent sex offenders upon the populace. Ivey’s answer was to sign a bill handing \$1.3 billion to the ADOC for the construction of new prisons which will swiftly be filled by a state that continues to pass legislation that makes it easier to imprison the most vulnerable layers of society.

Ivey’s passion for justice and public safety does not extend to Hyundai personnel, who use child labor, nor to scabs who have attacked striking Warrior Met miners. Undergirded by an increasingly stringent criminal code, the prison system exists to terrorize the working class and keep it submissive to the state and the big businesses it works for.

Alabama’s efforts to roll back due process and other rights of the accused are almost cartoonishly backwards. No faith should be put in the DOJ’s intervention, however; a government that carries out extrajudicial assassinations and operates secret torture sites is fundamentally incapable of defending democratic rights.

Alabama prisons are built to imprison workers. The abuses prisoners face within their walls are abuses against the entire working class, and they must be fought by the entire working class.



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