

Alabama inmate strike enters its second week

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A historic strike by Alabama inmates entered its second week on Monday.

Taken up with the support of prison advocacy organization Both Sides of the Wall, work stoppages began last Monday and spread rapidly throughout all the state's prisons. Unpaid inmate labor is used by prisons in areas such as laundry and food service and the strike has effectively brought some of those functions to a halt. Inmates have reported that prison staff has refused to serve them anything more than two cold meals daily since the strike began.

The Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) has been swift to underplay the significance and ramifications of the strike. Hours after Alabama news outlets reported on the strike reaching its second week, the ADOC released statements saying that most state inmates had returned to work. The ADOC also denies claims that they are withholding food and visitation privileges from inmates in retaliation.

Inmates disagree. On the first day of the strike, prisoners reported to family members that they had not been given any lunch hours past the appointed time. Kelly Betts, spokesperson for the ADOC, countered that they were lagging due to the work stoppages but that no one had been deprived of food. Over the past week, inmates from multiple facilities complained that they sometimes received nothing but a bologna sandwich or a single slice of cheese instead of a full meal.

"They are trying to starve us out at Staton," one inmate posted on Facebook last week about conditions for more than 1,300 inmates at the Staton Correctional Facility north of Montgomery.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an inmate at Ventress Correctional Facility told the *Montgomery Advertiser* that he had overheard a captain in the prison tell officers, "If they don't want to work, starve them."

Other prisoners told the *Montgomery Advertiser* that no considerations were being made for prisoners with allergies or other dietary restrictions; leaving it to the inmates themselves to sort, much like food service usually is. The ADOC has placed all state prisons on lockdown, confining

inmates to their cells or dorms with no allowance for movement—inmates are therefore unable to go to the commissary, where overpriced food items can be purchased to supplement the sub-par fare. Betts and company claimed that the inadequate rations are not orchestrated retaliation but are strictly the outcome of the work stoppages. Because inmates make up the largest share of prison food service, she said, the ADOC was "forced" to go on what she called a "holiday schedule" for meals.

Diyawn Caldwell, founder of the advocacy group Both Sides of the Wall, countered that the ADOC is responsible for ensuring that inmates are fed three times daily whether inmates are striking or not.

"Their regulations say they're supposed to be fed three times a day, two being hot meals," she told AL.com. "And due to their shortage of staffing, they're feeding them on the holiday schedule. Which shouldn't be the burden of the inmates. It's the burden of the staff because it's their responsibility to make sure that the inmates are fed."

Shannon Barlow, who is imprisoned at Limestone Correctional Facility in northern Alabama, told WBHM Public Radio reporters, "There's no hope, there's no promise of a future, and we're the ones basically who have been holding the ceiling up over our own heads all these years and we're just waking up to the fact that this is wrong."

In addition to scaling back food service, the ADOC canceled weekend visitation, a move that Caldwell believes will only fan the inmates' discontent.

"These men/women look forward to seeing their family. This is the only contact they physically have with them and this is why a lot of them stay out of any trouble. Many families have taken off work, paid for travel and hotels in preparation of visitation this weekend and they abruptly cancel it because they want to punish the men/women inside for exercising our 1st Amendment rights."

"They are doing exactly what they have been doing for so long, which is trying to maintain control through loss of privileges for no misconduct, retaliation and fear," Caldwell explained to AL.com.

Inmates have drawn up eight demands which they

delivered to Both Sides of the Wall ahead of the strike: a guarantee of parole to all eligible prisoners, repeal of the habitual offender act and a retroactive application of relaxed sentencing laws, abolition of life without parole, reduction of the 30-year maximum sentence for juvenile capital offenders to 15 years, mandatory parole reviews for all inmates who have served 25 or more years, a streamlined review process for medical furlough or release of elderly inmates, and the creation of a conviction integrity unit to investigate possible cases of wrongful conviction.

According to Caldwell, a steep reduction in paroles has led to a simmering despair that fuels violence inside the prisons.

“They have no way out...Because they’re sitting there, everybody is aggravated, they’re agitated and their tolerance level is very low. So they need some kind of hope, some type of incentive, and some type of window to be able to enter back into society. And basically, that’s through the parole board. And we need some relief there,” Caldwell said to the press.

“You’re working on free labor,” a prisoner at Fountain Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama told *Montgomery Advertiser*. “But you ain’t letting us go. You’re not giving us a chance of parole. So something’s got to break.”

ADOC Commissioner Jon Hamm has scoffed at criticism of the use of unpaid inmate labor. Most prisons, he says, rely upon inmate labor for essential tasks like food service and laundry. However, Alabama is one of only seven states—all of them in the Deep South—where inmates are denied even nominal compensation for their labor.

Last week, Republican Governor Kay Ivey dismissed the inmates’ demands out-of-hand, calling them “absurd.” According to Ivey, two 4,000 bed prisons being built with pandemic relief funds will ease tensions in the prisons; they are expected to be ready for occupation sometime in 2026.

She praised Commissioner Hamm for his handling of the strike, saying he had “things well under control...Everything’s still operational; there’s no disruption in essential services. We still got our two prisons being built so we can better provide for the safety of the inmates as well as the workers.”

Betts parroted Ivey and further asserted that inmates should know that their demands have to be handled through legislation—legislation Ivey has already denounced as “unwelcome in Alabama.”

The ADOC has long functioned with no oversight; its abuses of inmates are myriad. The agency refuses to share the state’s lethal injection protocol, even after botching numerous executions. Corrections officers look the other way when inmates are beaten or sexually assaulted by their peers; this violence is an added punishment in Alabama’s backwards criminal justice system. Medical care is likewise

abysmal; pregnant inmates have been forced to labor in restraints.

In 2020, prisoners were instructed to endorse their COVID-19 stimulus checks from the government but were denied the funds; they were channeled instead to inmate debts and fees. The ADOC forces inmates to purchase essentials such as toiletries and feminine hygiene products at a high mark-up through what is basically a monopoly; the stimulus checks could have alleviated the strain of those expenditures for inmates and their families. It could also have allowed some prisoners to save for their release.

More recently, the treatment of Kastellio Vaughan, an inmate at Staton Correctional Facility, raised alarm nationwide.

Days before the strike, Vaughan’s sister Kassie Vaughn received an SMS message containing photos of her brother looking insensate and emaciated; “Get help,” the accompanying text read. Vaughan had recently undergone surgery for a bowel obstruction; when Kassie raised questions with prison staff, she was put on a no-contact list.

The ADOC waffled, saying on one hand that Vaughan had requested and received care 11 separate times between July and September; they later said he had turned down medical care. They published statements by corrections officers in his files detailing the times he had asked for treatment and the times he supposedly turned treatment down; his family claims that the documents violate Kastellio’s Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) rights to privacy.

In an October 4 Facebook post, Kassie reported that her brother was doing better, but that other inmates were feeding him and cleaning the diapers he has had to wear since his obstruction.

The state’s prisons are such an embarrassment that the United States Department of Justice, representatives of the industrialized world’s most draconian judicial system, sued the ADOC in 2020. The trial set for 2024 cannot be expected to bring the ADOC to account—that will require the mobilization of the entire working class to overturn the rotten social and economic system, capitalism, which fills Alabama’s prisons.



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