

Alabama prison strike in third week amid reports of deaths, murder and staff beating of inmate

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A strike by inmates in Alabama’s prison system has reached its third week. Unpaid inmates provide the bulk of the labor within the prisons; work stoppages have therefore impacted laundry and meal provisions in addition to other essential tasks. While the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) has been quick to say that the work stoppages have mostly ended, inmates in five of the state’s 14 prisons remain on strike.

Strikes reportedly continued this week at St. Clair, Staton, Donaldson, Fountain, and Bibb correctional facilities, which house around 7,000 inmates each. Weekend visitation was canceled in those facilities.

The strike began on September 26 with demands for retroactive repeal of habitual offenders sentencing laws, reforms of the parole and juvenile capital offenders policy, and the creation of an oversight board to investigate possible wrongful convictions. Within hours, the strike had been taken up in every prison in the state.

Last Friday, ADOC issued a statement saying, “The overall situation with inmate work stoppages at the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) is improving across the state. All female facilities continue to experience normal operations and most male facilities are returning to normal operations, including regular meal service and weekend visitation.”

From the beginning, the state has responded with bluster and obfuscation. Five days after the strike began, Republican Governor Kay Ivey told the press that ADOC had the situation “well under control.” Photos and videos from inside the prisons paint a far more sobering portrait.

Cellphone footage obtained by the Marshall Project reveal trash piling up in hallways, and inmates have said that they are only receiving two meals a day—both cold, and neither nutritious. Photos of bologna sandwiches and a slice each of bread and cheese have circulated throughout social media. Inmates with special dietary needs have been left to fend for themselves without consideration.

In the first week of the strike, several inmates filed an emergency Motion to Intervene in the lawsuit filed against ADOC and the State of Alabama in December 2020 by the US

Department of Justice (DOC).

The motion contends that the lack of sustenance is “systematic and purposeful,” further evidence of the cruel and unusual punishment is alleged by the suit. The plaintiffs argue that the meal schedule and portioning are retaliatory, citing a memo from Donaldson Correctional Facility in Bessemer that states that “meal reductions would continue until the labor strike ended.”

“Meals have included slices of bread topped with some sort of sludge, uncooked hot dogs and miniscule portions of canned fruit,” said Clifford Harvey, attorney for the plaintiffs.

Harvey estimates that these meals provide around 800 calories daily; the average adult male needs about 2,500 calories a day.

During prior work stoppages, the ADOC has brought people from work-release programs into the prisons to provide meals. Many of these inmates have said that they have been threatened with solitary confinement or transfer to a higher security facility if they refuse.

At Limestone Correctional Facility near Huntsville, an inmate who was brought in to make sack lunches during the strike was videoed saying that a lieutenant told him that he had to go “no matter what.”

“They forced me to come over here from Decatur, put my life in jeopardy, by working against the inmates, my own people,” Doyle Lebron Gregory said in a video.

Gregory says that at least two inmates at Decatur Correctional Facility were locked up for refusing to participate. Robert Earl Council, the inmate and activist who videoed Gregory’s statements, alleges that corrections officers beat him and put him in solitary confinement for making the video.

The state’s assertion that they have the prisons “well under control” is an obscene joke. Since the beginning of the strike, nine inmates have died, three on October 6 alone. In fact, an inmate at Donaldson was stabbed to death less than 24 hours after Ivey told reporters that “everything is operational.”

A video shot by an inmate with a cellphone apparently depicts the stabbing. The ADOC neither confirmed nor denied the video’s authenticity, but it confirmed the fatal stabbing of

30-year-old Denarieya Smith. Donaldson inmates account for four of the nine deaths since the beginning of the strike.

Carla Crowder, the executive director of advocacy group Alabama Appleseed, told the *Montgomery Advertiser* that Ivey's words are "meaningless" and "not grounded in reality."

"What we saw in that video is outrageous," Crowder said, "but it's been outrageous in DOC for so long, and it just doesn't let up. It is not unusual to have multiple homicides or drug overdoses in a week, and videos circulating of sleeping guards and open-air drug use in the dorms. That is the new normal."

In the aftermath of Smith's murder, ADOC officials refused to provide numbers to reporters, but said that the prison was securely staffed. The ADOC's own reporting belies these claims; according to quarterly reports as of September 20, the entire prison system employs only 1,895 people. Donaldson alone imprisons nearly 1,500 people. Statewide, ADOC imprisons over 26,000 men and women in a prison system designed to house just over 15,000.

Diyawn Caldwell of Both Sides of the Wall says that "the death toll has risen significantly" since the DOJ sued the state, according to the Marshall Project. "They're understaffed. The officers are bringing in the drugs that are killing people. The conditions are barbaric. You have people that are committing suicide. No one is making parole. What else do we do?"

The plaintiffs in the Motion to Intervene assert that conditions "have worsened markedly" within that time frame.

The ADOC reports a steadily increasing rate of staff attrition. It lost 495 staff members between September 2021 and September 2022, and it has over 500 vacancies. At the same time, the rate of parole denials has increased dramatically, doubling between 2017 and 2021. In 2017, the parole board denied 46 percent of applications. In 2021, it denied 84 percent of applications, increasing even after the DOJ cited overcrowding as a factor in its lawsuit.

Shortages are not the only staffing problem in Alabama prisons. Drugs, particularly prescription opioids, find their way into the prisons even during lockdowns. Inmates have reported numerous abuses.

In 2014, the Southern Poverty Law Center represented several mentally ill inmates who complained that they were penalized and mistreated because of their illnesses. The complainants were denied professional services during acute mental health crises, sanctioned for showing symptoms of their illnesses, and in some cases, encouraged to commit suicide.

The complaint offered an especially brutal illustration: "After one prisoner who had repeatedly requested mental health care cut himself with one of the razors, a correctional officer said to him, 'If you die, you die.'"

The inmate had received the razors from a correctional officer.

In 2017, US District Judge Myron Thompson ruled against the ADOC in that suit. He pointed out several deficits in the

ADOC's treatment of mentally ill inmates and highlighted the overcrowding and staff shortages as a particular concern.

Thompson wrote in his judgment that "the severity and urgency" of the complaints required that "relief must be both immediate and long term."

The only immediate relief came after an inmate killed himself two weeks after testifying in the trial; the ADOC made some changes to its suicide watch guidelines, but the staffing shortages worsened along with the overcrowding. Inmates continued to report staff abuse.

Just last week, a video of Elmore corrections officer Ell White beating an inmate in the middle of a mental crisis went viral on social media and was circulated worldwide.

The inmate, 44-year-old Jimmy Norman, has retained attorneys and intends to file suit. The beating occurred in September; the ADOC put White on leave last week when the video was made public.

White was involved in the 2017 killing of Billy Smith, an Elmore inmate who had been beaten and hogtied by corrections officers after an altercation with other inmates. Restrained face down on the floor, Smith vomited and began choking.

White was one of the corrections officers who was tasked with transporting Smith to another prison to receive medical care. Smith was unresponsive when he was removed from the transport van and was later pronounced dead. Nurses examining Smith reported hearing water in his lungs; upon investigation, White admitted that he had poured water over Smith, allegedly to rouse him to consciousness—a detail he had omitted in the original report.

Although the ADOC's own internal investigation implicated him in Smith's beating and death, White received no disciplinary action. He went on to be named in multiple complaints of excessive force by corrections officers at Elmore, where the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) says violence against inmates is "endemic." Over a six-month period, EJI uncovered more than a dozen reports of inmates being restrained, stripped, and beaten by officers.

White's tenure demonstrates that the state will not reform itself; it is thumbing its nose at the DOJ suit even now.



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