

Inmates in Hamilton, Ontario jail hold week-long hunger strike against deplorable conditions

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Around 180 prison inmates in the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre in southern Ontario recently conducted a week-long hunger strike against what they called “sickening” and deteriorating conditions.

The prison administration subsequently agreed to address the inmates’ grievances, but the appalling conditions faced by inmates are pervasive across Canada’s provincial and federal corrections systems. The administrators of numerous facilities, as well as the provincial and federal corrections departments, have made countless empty promises over the years to improve conditions.

The inmates at Hamilton-Wentworth cited constant overcrowding, a lack of outdoor time, and the threatened loss of television privileges as reasons for launching the hunger strike.

A number of inmates in the Niagara Detention Centre near the Canada-US border also launched a hunger strike over similar grievances, although it’s unclear whether their strike continues.

Jesse Bull, the inmate at Hamilton-Wentworth who launched the hunger strike, told CBC News that during the last two months, he had only been allowed outside in the yard once. He cited a lack of clean laundry as another major issue, saying that he receives clean bed sheets only once a month. Inmates are also incensed at mail policies, saying the jail administration tampers with their mail and restricts who they can write to.

Due to staffing shortages that are rampant across the province, jails and prisons routinely implement lockdown protocols that cram three inmates into a cell designed for two. In some cases, inmates are forced to sleep on the floor.

“To be three in a cell, eating where you use the bathroom, being locked down in a hot cell in the middle

of summer—no,” Bull explained to CBC News.

He also stressed that many of the issues the inmates experience are not caused by unruly behaviour, and that the prison administration does not fundamentally care about their well-being.

“Whenever we get locked down, it’s just a staffing issue... it’s not because we’re fighting or drinking,” he said. “There are solutions to this and everybody just doesn’t give a f--k. I just feel like this is one of those situations that will never get solved... it’s a broken system.”

In response to the inmates’ grievances, the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, which administers the province’s jails, issued the same potted statements it has made ad infinitum, about providing “correctional services with the tools and resources needed to maintain the security and safety of staff and those in provincial custody.”

Over the years, inmates in Ontario’s prison systems have understandably refused to take the province at its word. The Hamilton-Wentworth hunger strike is only the first of the year, and follows on the heels of strikes in the same facility in 2021 and 2020.

Prison hunger strikes have become a perennial struggle by inmates for the sole reason that the conditions they are forced to endure are barbaric and only getting worse, putting the lie to claims by the Progressive Conservative government of Ontario and Premier Doug Ford, as well as their provincial and federal counterparts across Canada, that they stand for “human rights.”

In March of last year, Hamilton-Wentworth inmates launched a strike over the spread of COVID-19 within the prison population and the refusal of the administration to take even basic steps to inform inmates about and protect them from the deadly disease. The SARS-CoV-2 virus

was undoubtedly introduced into the facility by staff, who operated under unscientific government guidelines that claim that the virus is spread mainly through “droplets” and physical contact, rather than through airborne particles.

Justin Piché, a criminologist at the University of Ottawa who built a database of COVID-19 infections in Ontario prisons, bluntly told CBC News in January 2022, at the height of the Omicron-fueled fifth wave of the pandemic, that “COVID is skyrocketing behind bars in Ontario.” From the start of the pandemic to January 2022, over 11,000 positive cases were recorded in Canadian prisons, a rate higher than the general population.

Any doubts that conditions in Ontario jails are only becoming more deadly were dispelled by a damning report published by the province’s chief coroner this past February. The report showed that inmate deaths nearly doubled from 23 in 2020 to 41 in 2021. In the eight years leading up to the report, 192 inmates perished in Ontario’s prisons.

Exposing the punitive character of the criminal justice system, the report also found that 72 percent of inmates who died had yet to be brought before a court of law. Ontario’s jails are reserved for inmates on shorter sentences or those awaiting trial.

Among the dead, 40 percent were killed by an illicit drug overdose, 24 percent by suicide, and 28 percent by natural causes. Significantly, the report found that prison staff were the number one carriers of illicit drugs into facilities.

The report’s panelists painted a picture of an entirely debased culture among the prison administration: “We learned of a work environment plagued by absenteeism, low morale, a competitive drive to avoid blame, a severely restricted ability to perform the most important and most career-gratifying aspects of the job, and a prevailing dark cloud of mistrust.”

The abysmal conditions in provincial jails holds true for federal penitentiaries overseen by the “progressive” Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and the vast gulag of the American prison-industrial complex south of the border.

A report published in February 2021 exposed the widespread and arbitrary use of solitary confinement in federal prisons, constituting torture as defined by the United Nations. In one case, an inmate was held in solitary confinement for 22 hours a day with little to no human contact for over 16 years.

A number of high-profile deaths in federal

penitentiaries, including the suicide of 19-year-old Ashley Smith in 2007, led to public outrage, prompting the Trudeau government in 2018 to announce a “reform” of the solitary confinement rules. In reality, this was mere window dressing and kept the inhuman practice essentially intact.

More recently in the US, the American working population was reminded of the utter hypocrisy and depravity of a two-party political system which oversees a network of dungeons in which inmates starve, choke on their own excrement, and are eaten alive by insects in their cells, all while Washington presents itself as a beacon of democracy and equality.

The entire political system in Canada has similarly moved far to the right. While the provincial and federal governments spend billions bailing out the banks and corporations, and arming the military to the teeth to wage war against Russia and the coming war with China in alliance with US imperialism, prison inmates are left to wallow in misery. Meanwhile, millions of Canadian workers are thrust into economic destitution and thus at greater risk of being caught up in a criminal justice system which will force them to rot behind bars.

A new right-wing political campaign by premiers and police departments across the country to “toughen” bail laws will place thousands more workers and the poor in prisons that are already straining to hold their current inhabitants. On Tuesday Ontario Premier Ford announced plans to “put more boots on the ground” by slashing requirements for the hiring of new police officers.

Meanwhile, the real criminals, including the capitalist politicians who allowed COVID-19 to rip through the population and kill over 50,000 innocent people and counting, as well as the financial and corporate swindlers on Bay Street who daily impoverish legions of workers and retirees, remain free.

This exposes the political bankruptcy of the entire capitalist system, including its so-called “progressive” defenders in the New Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy, who have kept the Liberals in power for years and wholly endorsed the “tough on crime” measures that will ultimately be used to suppress the struggles of the working class.



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