

Children imprisoned on the former death row at notorious Angola prison in Louisiana face brutal, dangerous conditions

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The state of Louisiana is currently incarcerating children on the former death row unit at the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, where they face horrific conditions including prolonged isolation and dangerous heat without access to air conditioning.

Last month, on July 17, as part of an ongoing federal class action lawsuit against the state's decision last year to transfer youth to the adult prison, the ACLU and other civil rights attorney groups submitted new statements from children who described brutal treatment including being confined in sweltering windowless cells for days, only allowed out for eight minutes a day to shower, being beaten by guards and being fed foul food and water. The attorneys are demanding an emergency order to stop the further transfer of juveniles to the facility and to transfer out those who are currently there.

Angola is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States with over 5,000 inmates. It is an adult prison, but last year Democratic Governor Jon Bel Edwards announced plans to move multiple children within the custody of the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ) to Angola after multiple youth escaped from the Bridge City juvenile detention center. Officials at the time claimed the move would be temporary; however, the spring 2023 deadline to transfer them to other juvenile centers has come and gone. Since October 2022, between 70 and 80 children, some as young as 12 years old, have been sent to the prison. In early July, the state said approximately 15 children were currently held at the prison.

None of the youth have been charged with crimes, as juvenile delinquency proceedings are civil, not criminal, findings. Nevertheless, as the July memorandum submitted by the plaintiffs' attorneys states,

“incarceration of children at the OJJ Angola facility, in the prison's former death row cells have subjected them to conditions of confinement so seriously deficient as to constitute punishment—rather than rehabilitation or treatment—in violation of their constitutional rights.”

The testimony from the incarcerated youth attest to this assessment.

Sixteen-year-old Daniel D. said he has been to Angola three times. “When I first arrived at Angola, I was locked alone in my cell and not let out except to shower for three days.” He continued, “I am confined alone in my cell every day from 5 p.m. until 8 a.m. the next morning. The water in my cell is not drinkable. The food is horrible. I have only eaten three food trays since arriving here on June 16, 2023. I have to buy commissary food to eat.

“I have seen other children be punished by being left alone in a cell for 48 hours.

“I have only been able to call my family once since returning to Angola. No one from my family can visit me because it is too far for them to travel here. When I was at Swanson, I could call my family throughout the day, every day.

“There is no air conditioner on my block. It is scorching, and the fans only sometimes work. Sometimes the power goes out, and there are no fans.

“I am still not receiving substance use treatment. I get that treatment at other juvenile facilities. For school, I sit in front of a computer all day. There is only one teacher for all the kids. There needs to be a library in this facility like in others.”

Another child inmate, Charles C., who suffers from serious mental illness, including PTSD from being shot at age 13 years old, in addition to schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and ADHD, reported violent treatment inside the

prison. He was thrown against a wall and injured by prison staff, only to be maced in his open wound the next day. He stated that OJJ guards, “maced a youth while he was handcuffed and shackled. [The other youth] was in his cell, next to mine ... When they maced [him] the spray went over into my cell.”

Additionally, he reported that the counseling services were poor and that he had been denied educational opportunities. “I am close to getting my HISET (high school diploma)—and it makes me sad I can’t earn it. They keep promising that they’ll educate me but don’t.”

Amid the extreme heat wave that has encompassed the entire southern US since July, the youth have been subjected to dangerous temperatures. Charles C. stated that, “The tier where I sleep and have been on lockdown is not air conditioned. They have a fan and are supposed to give us ice and water, but only provide it about half the time. I am often thirsty. It’s hard to sleep because it’s so hot. When the power goes out, we don’t even have the fan.”

Dr. Susi Vassallo, the plaintiffs’ medical expert who holds certification in Emergency Medicine and Medical Toxicology testified, “I would not dare to keep my dog in these conditions for fear of my dog dying. It has been dangerously hot in Angola so far this summer. Confining children for all or most of the day to concrete and cement buildings without air conditioning is foolhardy and perilous. My knowledge of the unconstitutional and inadequate medical care provided to adults at Angola heightens my fear that a child will deteriorate or die at Angola due to the conditions and the poor health care provided at the prison.”

The ACLU noted in its filings that the local heat index has remained above 88 degrees Fahrenheit (31.1 Celsius) since May. However, with the recent heat waves, part of the record-shattering global temperatures over the last month as a result of capitalist-induced climate change, the heat index has regularly surpassed 100 degrees F (37.7 C) and even reached 130 degrees F (54.4 C) in the area.

The perilous conditions at Angola are not unique but commonplace across Louisiana and the entire US. None of the seven prisons within the Louisiana state prison system have air conditioning for prisoner dormitories, and the state has already acknowledged one heat-related death this year. A study from November 2022 published in the *American Journal of Medicine*, found that between 2001 and 2019, 271 inmate deaths in Texas prisons “may be attributable to extreme heat days.”

The barbaric treatment of prisoners is the rule, not the

exception, in America’s sprawling prison system, which the WSWS has correctly characterized as the American gulag. It is a system for which the Democrats no less than the Republicans are responsible. In addition to the role of Governor Bel Edwards, the federal judge assigned to the case and who denied the ACLU’s initial motion to prevent the transfers last year, Shelly Dick was appointed by former Democratic President Barack Obama.

Despite acknowledging that, “the prospect of putting a teenager to bed at night in a locked cell behind razor wire surrounded by swamps at Angola is disturbing” and that “the court is mindful that the specter of the prison surrounding will likely cause psychological trauma and harm” to youth who are already so “traumatized and emotionally and psychologically disturbed that OJJ is virtually unable to provide a secure care environment,” she nevertheless sided with the state against the youth and allowed the transfers to proceed.

A hearing on the latest filings about the abuse of youth at Angola is scheduled for August 15.

While the media has focused on racial questions in the case—highlighting the fact that the majority of the youth being held at the prison are African American—the working class must understand these attacks as a class question and mount a response on this basis. Across the US and internationally, police violence and state repression are wielded against workers and youth of all races and ethnicities as part of the effort to maintain capitalist rule.

It was on the basis of mobilizing the entire working class in the United States and internationally, that the Workers League and Young Socialists, the predecessors to the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, mounted a widespread campaign to defend Gary Tyler, a political prisoner who was framed up for murder at the age of 16 and imprisoned for over 40 years at Angola. The Workers League and Young Socialists won the support of hundreds of thousands of workers and youth to defend Tyler, who was forced to accept a manslaughter plea and was finally released in 2016.



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