

Recent lawsuits detail abuse and torture at prisons in upstate New York

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Two separate civil lawsuits filed in December by two prisoners in upstate New York once again highlight the brutality and horror of the American gulag. The plaintiffs are demanding restitution after they were savagely beaten by guards at one prison and waterboarded at another on October 7.

In their lawsuits, Charles Wright and Eugene Taylor, initially prisoners at Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville, New York, about 60 miles north of New York City, describe how they were first subjected to physical and psychological abuse during a weeklong lockdown of the prison in early October.

This lockdown is detailed in a third lawsuit by 44 Green Haven prisoners, which describes how guards at Green Haven, including special “Emergency Response Teams” of officers from other facilities, went from cell to cell “punching and kicking prisoners, slamming their faces into walls and twisting fingers.” This rampage was carried out in response to an assault by one prisoner on a guard.

Wright and Taylor say that they were viciously beaten and pepper sprayed in their cells. According to his lawsuit, Wright was directed to strip down to his underwear, put his hands behind his head and face the back wall of his cell. After Wright complied with these instructions, a guard punched him in the back of the head, shot pepper spray in his mouth and slammed his head against the floor and toilet.

On October 7, after being beaten, both men were accused of possessing contraband. They were cuffed and shackled before being transported via vans to Great Meadow Correctional Facility, 200 miles north of New York City.

Wright describes that upon arriving at Great Meadow he was again pepper sprayed before being chained to a bed and waterboarded. A prison guard placed a dirty rag over Wright’s nose and mouth and poured water over it for 45 seconds straight while another guard observed the torture.

Taylor’s experience was similar. He describes being taken to a room where a guard, apparently the same one who tortured Wright, held a rag over Taylor’s face and repeatedly pushing his head underwater. A small group of

guards stood nearby and watched.

Waterboarding is most infamously known as a favorite method of torture employed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against people accused of terrorist connections in the Middle East. The constant stream of water poured over an individual’s covered nose and mouth causes the person to experience the sensation of drowning.

Following their torture sessions, both Wright and Taylor faced disciplinary hearings. Wright was found guilty of assaulting prison staff and possessing contraband and thrown in a “segregated housing unit” for six months. Taylor has been accused of demonstration and gang activity. Both men deny the charges.

There is only one other recorded case of waterboarding at New York state prisons. In his federal lawsuit, filed in 2018, Matthew Raymond, a prisoner at Auburn Correctional Facility in the Finger Lakes region of Central New York, describes being shackled, placed on a table and waterboarded by a lieutenant at the prison in 2016. The officer held Raymond’s head down by his hair, pulled his shirt over his face and poured water over his nose and mouth for an extended period.

Although this specific method of torture has not been commonly utilized, the degraded conditions of life and callous treatment of the incarcerated is far from unique in New York prisons. At the end of 2022, 26 inmates at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York, sued the state after prison guards indiscriminately beat numerous prisoners during a facility-wide search in November of that year.

In 2016, six female prisoners sued the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervisions (DOCCS) seeking an injunction that would require DOCCS to take necessary steps to stop mass sexual abuse against female prisoners across the state. The previous year, 2015, Samuel Harrell, a prisoner at the Fishkill Correctional Facility in New York died after being handcuffed, beaten, and thrown down a flight of stairs by a group of guards.

The same year that Harrell was murdered, it was revealed

that guards at the Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York had systematically tortured inmates after two inmates escaped from the prison. New York Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo was personally involved in the brutality, questioning several of the prisoners before they were beaten and choked with plastic bags by guards. More than 60 prisoners filed complaints of abuse. Cuomo defended the actions of the guards, declaring it was not the time “to second-guess the basic operation” at the prison. He continued “the basic operation has been fantastic because no one has ever escaped before.”

Rikers Island prison in New York City is one of the worst hellholes in the country. A report from the office of the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York in 2014 exposed a “deep seated culture of violence” at the prison, describing it as “a place where brute force is the first impulse rather than the last resort, a place where verbal insults are repaid with physical injuries, where beatings are routine while accountability is rare.”

Conditions at the facility have only gotten worse over the last ten years. Dozens of prisoners died in 2021 because of the complete collapse of basic services at the prison due to staffing shortages caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Sixteen inmates died in 2021, 19 in 2022 and nine 2023. The facility had its first death of 2024 on January 4.

The incidents in upstate New York are only a handful of those reported over the last decade. Bruce Barket, a lawyer whose firm filed the 2022 Sing Sing lawsuit and the two lawsuits in December, has said, “Given that the Department of Corrections administration apparently approved of the brutality, no one should be surprised that some guards escalated the abuse.”

The United States is the world’s largest jailer. According to the World Population Review, over two million people are incarcerated in the US. This is roughly 25 percent of the world’s total prison population. These men and women, the vast majority poor and incarcerated for petty crimes and infractions, are subjected to wretched living conditions and savage brutality every day.

The horrors inflicted upon the incarcerated in the Empire State are commonplace across the US. Last year, statements submitted by the American Civil Liberties Union in an ongoing lawsuit shed further light on the horrendous conditions facing children incarcerated on the former death row unit at the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola).

In April, millions internationally were sickened and angered following the release of images showing the agonizing deaths of two inmates incarcerated in different states. Lashawn Thompson died in the Fulton County Jail in Atlanta, Georgia on September 12, 2022. He was abandoned

by prison staff in a filthy cell filled with refuse. He withered away and died, eaten alive by insects. Joshua McLemore in Indiana, previously diagnosed with schizophrenia, starved to death in the Jackson County Jail in August 2021. For nearly 20 days, McLemore was kept in solitary confinement despite displaying no aggressive behavior. Neither man had been convicted of a crime.

Under the supervision of both Republicans and Democrat administrations at the federal, state and municipal levels, the barbaric methods of intimidation and oppression utilized by American imperialism abroad have been brought home in the face of escalating social, economic and political crisis.

It is increasingly difficult to differentiate between the haunting pictures taken at the CIA-run Abu Ghraib torture prison in Iraq twenty years ago and the images and stories emerging from the American gulag.

As American imperialism plunges headfirst towards world war in the face of growing financial instability and the intensification of the struggle of the working class against rampant inequality and exploitation, the capitalist ruling class turns to the most bestial methods of repression to stifle opposition among workers to its accumulation of ever-greater profits.

Workers must be warned, the horrors of the present penal system are only the beginning. Israel’s ongoing genocide against the civilian population of Gaza, backed and directed by the US Biden administration and its imperialist allies, demonstrates the lengths to which the ruling class will go to ensure its continued existence. What is being inflicted on Gaza today will be used against workers at home tomorrow.

Ending this devastating repression and freeing the countless victims of the American gulag will only be accomplished by the political mobilization of the international working class against the entire profit system from which these injustices ultimately stem.



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