

Inmate deaths mount as wildcat strike by New York state prison guards continues

Philip Guelpa
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As the wildcat strike of New York state prison guards entered its fourth week, the death toll among prisoners has been mounting.

Despite a tentative agreement having been proposed last week between the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and the union, the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA), which represents the guards but did not officially call the strike in order to evade legal responsibility, most of the strikers rejected the agreement and have not returned to work.

A modified agreement was then proposed by the state, but the union refused to sign on to the agreement because it was not involved in its drafting. While some of the strikers have returned to work, under threat of dismissal and termination of health insurance by the state, many have continued the walkout.

A revised agreement between the state and the union was announced on Saturday, which required the guards to return to work on Monday, however compliance was limited throughout the day according to the latest reports.

National Guard troops and state troopers, deployed by New York Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul, remain as substitute guards along with some state troopers. Soldiers have complained that they are untrained and ill equipped to function as prison guards. Inmates report inhuman conditions, including a lack of food, medication and extended lockdown in their cells as well as increased brutality by their guards.

As a result, a growing number of deaths have occurred among the incarcerated population. So far, at least nine inmate fatalities have been reported since the beginning of the wildcat strike on February 17. One is the result of a beating by guards. Of the others, at least one is reported to have committed suicide by hanging,

with no one present to intervene, likely as a result of the harsh conditions, and two others due to failure to receive prompt medical care. Details of the remaining deaths are not available.

The latest reported death, which occurred on Saturday, March 1, was that of Messiah Nantwi, 22, at the Mid-State Correctional Facility in Marcy. The New York State Police are investigating the death and 15 corrections staff members have been placed on leave.

Nine inmates interviewed by the *New York Times* reported that Nantwi was brutally beaten by corrections officers, reportedly members of the correctional emergency response team (CERT), which has been involved in other such attacks. Their intervention came after Nantwi had an argument with members of the National Guard who were enforcing a lockdown but was otherwise unprovoked. Governor Hochul has described the conduct by prison staff leading to his death as “extremely disturbing.”

There is a history of such behavior at Mid-State. In 2016, dozens of corrections officers brutally jumped on, kicked and sodomized inmates. The state has been ruled liable to pay monetary damages to the inmate victims. Nevertheless, in an indication that such a regime of terror is effectively condoned, many of the officers who took part in the beating still work at the prison.

It is telling that Nantwi’s death took place at the Mid-State facility which is located across the street from Marcy Correctional Facility, both in Marcy, located near Utica, in upstate New York. There, a similar beating death, that of Robert Brooks, took place last December.

The indictment of 10 prison guards in Brooks’ death was the immediate trigger that set off the wildcat strike, which quickly grew to encompass nearly all of the

state's 42 correctional facilities.

Unlike the beating of Brooks, details of which came to light due to having been recorded on guards' body cameras, the corrections officers allegedly involved in the attack on Nantwi either did not have cameras or had them turned off, according to the *Times* interviewees. This was no innocent oversight, occurring after Governor Hochul had ordered all prison guards to wear functional body cams while on duty.

Another death reported during the strike is that of Jonathan Grant, a 61-year-old inmate at the Auburn Correctional Facility. He was found unresponsive in his cell. The cause of death has yet to be determined. However, it is known that Grant was unwell and had recently suffered a series of strokes but had been refused medical assistance.

Although the immediate trigger of the wildcat walkout was the indictment of prison guards in Brooks' beating death, it has become clear that its principal aim is to repeal the HALT Act (Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act) which places certain limits on the use of solitary confinement. The striking guards refuse to accept any restraint on their ability to mete out this brutal form of punishment to impose control over the inmates.

The determination of the guards to accomplish this goal in spite of the various sanctions threatened by the state, including dismissal, testify to the real purpose of the prison system. In the latest proposed agreement, the state accedes to the guards' demands by committing to establish a formal review of HALT.

The terms "correctional" and "corrections officers" are meant to denote a system whose aim is to "correct" bad behavior. In reality, these institutions and their staffs are key components of capitalist rule over a highly unequal society in which ordinary people's lives are subject to the overriding interests and whims of the ruling elite and their agents.

The prison system is a concentrated manifestation of the general phenomenon of police violence where guards are empowered to exploit and brutalize inmates with almost total impunity.

The recent indictment of 30 correctional officers at Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall in Downey, California, for orchestrating "gladiator fights" among incarcerated youth, provides a window into the brutality inherent in the US prison system, which dehumanizes society's

most vulnerable and perpetuates class oppression.

According to a March 5 press release from the Correctional Association of New York, deaths in the state's prisons are not an unusual occurrence. In 2023 there were 107 deaths. In 2024 there were 143, a 34 percent increase. This data is of limited utility, however, as it reports only the manner of death (accident, homicide, suicide, natural, unknown) not the cause of death (e.g., neglect to provide necessary medical care, assault by prison guards, etc.).

Although conditions created by the strike appear to have led to an increase in the rate of deaths, this is in fact simply an intensification of the barbaric environment which is "normal" for this and other prisons and jails across the country. Whether from assault or neglect, the New York state prison system is a deliberately brutal environment intended to subjugate working class and poor inmates by subjecting them to a regime of deprivation and terror.

All expressions of shock and disapproval about the conditions in the American gulag by members of the ruling class and their agents, such as that by Governor Hochul that the death of Robert Brooks is "extremely disturbing" and that of the state corrections commissioner, Daniel Martuscello III, who issued a pro forma statement which sought to represent the killing as uncharacteristic of the state prison system, are hypocritical in the extreme.



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