Inside Pearsall, the ICE prison holding wounded delivery worker Wilber Garces Perez

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After an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent shot Wilber Rafael Garces Perez in Austin on Sunday, September 20, ICE transported the wounded Venezuelan delivery worker from the hospital to its South Texas ICE Processing Center in Pearsall, roughly 130 miles away. The 28-year-old arrived with a bullet lodged near his spine. He told reporters Monday that he had slept on the floor and received no pain medication until a nurse gave him a pill that day.

On Monday evening, Wilber was hospitalized again after becoming unable to lift his left arm. By midnight, he had been returned to Pearsall. His attorney, Kate Lincoln-Goldfinch, said Tuesday that he was being held in isolation in a non-medical bed and given ibuprofen and Tylenol. A man shot by an ICE agent was thus placed back under the agency's control, with his urgent medical needs subordinated to his imprisonment.

Wilber's treatment expresses the brutality of the Trump administration's campaign against immigrant workers. As the administration expands the detention system to carry out mass deportations, confinement itself is being used as a weapon to exhaust people physically and psychologically and pressure them to abandon their legal claims. The threat reaches beyond those already imprisoned, spreading fear through workplaces and immigrant communities.

Pearsall is owned and operated by the private prison corporation GEO Group and has a capacity of 1,904. During a February visit, House Representative Joaquin Castro reported approximately 1,700 people held there. Detainees told him of denied medical care, including a diabetic woman who had gone without medication for months. Some wanted to be deported simply to escape their imprisonment.

An interview with a former Pearsall detainee, whose identity the *World Socialist Web Site* is withholding, gives a picture of what awaited Wilber upon his arrival. "I had worms in my food," he said. "I was basically surviving on commissary because the food was so bad."

He described dormitories in which men had no bed: "And at times there were four to five guys sleeping on the floor because they don't have any rooms. There's a hundred guys in one room." Even their names were dispensed with. "They will never call you by your name. They call you by a number. They don't say your name. They say things like, '71, you have visitation.' You're just a number in there."

"To me, it looked like a modern-day concentration camp in there," he said. "Everything in there is very depressing."

"The food is super bad. It doesn't have any flavors. They don't have any salt. They give you beans every day, every day beans. I counted five different styles of beans, but no flavor. So beans for lunch, beans for dinner." During the federal government shutdown, he said, "you would get a piece of chicken once a month. After the shutdown was over, they started giving it once a week. But still, the food was terrible. Not edible."

Detainees also supplied the labor to prepare these meals. "The kitchen, they make people work inside the kitchen for basically free for food." A 2022 Department of Homeland Security inspector general's report recorded detainee wages of just $1 to $3 a day. While prisoners worked for these sums, GEO's contract guaranteed payment for 1,350 beds, whether occupied or not. Between November 2020 and October 2021, ICE paid approximately $18 million for unused beds.

That same inspection exposed how detainees could be packed together even when space was available elsewhere in the facility. During the pandemic, officials filled

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dormitories while leaving others empty, instead of spreading people out to reduce COVID-19 transmission. The former detainee described the consequences of sharing crowded living quarters with sick men: “And the first two months I was sick every single day, every single day, because everybody touches everything and everybody is sick.”

“And their ducts are very dirty. They never change the filters. And sometimes they had a bat come out of the, I guess that would be the duct, the ductwork. And they were chasing it around trying to get rid of the bat.”

When the ventilation system failed, the crowding made it impossible to escape the heat. “And then on top of that, for the whole time I was there, the AC broke three times. Three times they had to move us to different dorms.” On one occasion, however, a transfer was impossible: “And there was one time it was close to 90 degrees inside there. It was like 86 degrees inside, locked up, but they brought some fans and that’s the best they could do. They couldn’t get any AC people to come and service it.

“And they were so overcrowded that they couldn’t move us anywhere, so we were stuck in a hot room, everybody sweating and stinking.”

His confinement also included four days in solitary, where even access to water was denied. “They threw me into the hole once. When I got into the hole, they put me in a cell and there was no water.

“So if you have to use the restroom, you’re gonna have to smell your own stuff. It was nasty and disgusting. So they had me in that room for two days with no water.

“Finally, my wife and my sister got hold of somebody in Congress and then the jail headquarters. So they came and moved me to a room where there was water.”

From his cell, he could hear another man “screaming and banging his head on the door.” Another detainee told him the man had been held there for a year without medical attention. “I assume the guy was sane and went crazy after being put in that room. I had to hold on to my faith so I didn’t go crazy either in that ‘poço,’” he said, using the Portuguese word for a well or pit.

The scale of solitary confinement at Pearsall is documented in a report by Physicians for Human Rights and Harvard researchers: 488 people were placed in isolation there between April 2024 and May 2025, the fourth-highest total in ICE’s system. Former professional rugby player Vincent Jobo reported being isolated for 12 days without drinking water, medication or a mattress after a suicide attempt. GEO denied his account.

For the former detainee interviewed by the WSWS, obtaining care was a struggle in the regular dormitories as well. Notices promised dental treatment within six months, he said: “But they don’t even have a dentist on staff. So they lie, and people are just not being treated there for their medical sickness.” He recounted his own attempt to get help:

“I had severe pain in my eye, and I asked for medical attention. And the sergeant came and said, ‘Well, what do you want me to do? You want me to open your head and see what’s wrong with it?’

“I said, ‘No, just give me to a doctor.’ And he said, ‘Well, there ain’t nobody here.’ I said, ‘Wait a minute, how is nobody here?’ ‘Well, yeah, they leave on the weekends. They go home.’

“So you’re telling me that people don’t get sick during the weekends? And I couldn’t sleep for two days. My eye was tearing up nonstop, and I had severe pain behind my eyeball.

“I saw somebody four days later, and all they did was give me some ibuprofen and say, ‘Hey, here we go.’ This is what kind of medical conditions you get there.”

Emergency calls from Pearsall show families trying to obtain the help their imprisoned relatives could not secure inside. A Wired investigation documented nearly 80 calls between January and May 2025. In one, a woman called because her husband was too weak to leave his bed and had received no help. The records also included three suicide attempts: one man swallowed pills, another ingested cleaning chemicals and a third cut himself.

GEO claims “around-the-clock access to medical care” and “dietician-approved meals,” alongside a 100 percent accreditation score in 2023. But the former detainee’s warning to anyone entering Pearsall was stark: “So if you’re sick or you have an emergency, good luck, because you’re pretty much gonna die there.”

The powers of arbitrary arrest and confinement exercised against immigrants threaten the entire working class. Workers must demand Wilber’s immediate release and the medical care he needs, with full accountability for his shooting and subsequent mistreatment. Pearsall and the entire network of these medieval torture chambers must be shut down.

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