

Hunger Strike at Pelican Bay Prison: The Humanity and Courage of the Prisoners...

The Moral Responsibility to Support Their Demands

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Prisoners at the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison have been on a hunger strike since July 1—demanding an end to what amounts to torture and brutally inhumane conditions. The weekend of July 2-3, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) reported that 6,600 prisoners, in 13 different prisons, refused food in solidarity with the strike. And there has been growing support on the outside from people who are demanding that the CDCR meet the prisoners' demands.

The 13th day of the strike, alarming, urgent reports started coming out that the medical condition of some of the prisoners was at a severe crisis. Mediators in contact with prisoners reported that some of the strikers had lost 25-35 pounds. According to a July 13 press release from Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, a source with access to the medical condition of the prisoners, who asked to remain anonymous, said the health of the hunger strikers was quickly and severely deteriorating—that some were in renal failure and had been unable to make urine for three days; and some had blood sugars measuring in the 30 range, which can be fatal if not treated. Legal representatives who visited prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU on Tuesday, July 12, reported that many prisoners were experiencing irregular heartbeats and palpitations, dizziness, shortness of breath and other respiratory problems; some were suffering from diagnosed cardiac arrhythmia. There were reports that prisoners at Calipatria State Prison and Corcoran, on a hunger strike in solidarity with the prisoners at Pelican Bay, were also in a dangerous medical condition.

Now consider this: By the time you read this, it will be at least *one week* since these reports started coming out. And the CDCR is still refusing to even consider any of the demands of the prisoners.

What are these demands? To be treated like *human beings*. The prisoners want an end to long-term solitary confinement where they are kept in windowless cells with no human contact for 23 hours a day. They want an end to collective punishment, and the practice of “debriefing,” which amounts to forced interrogation on gang affiliation. They are asking for decent food, rehabilitation and education programs, one phone call per week, one photo per year, two packages a year, more visiting time, permission to have wall calendars, and warm clothing. (See “[Prisoners at Pelican Bay SHU Announce Hunger Strike](#),” *Revolution* #237, June 26, 2011, for the prisoners' demands.)

Now think about this: Hundreds of prisoners, right now, are *willing to die* for these basic and just demands. They are doing everything they can, in the most isolated, inhumane conditions, to refuse to be treated like animals. And because of this, a light is being shined

on the torture and inhumanity going on behind these prison walls. We can't say "We didn't know."

So the question is: What are people on the outside going to do? People have the *moral responsibility* to act in a way commensurate with the justness of the prisoners' demands and the urgency of the situation.

The CDCR *does not* treat these prisoners like human beings. It argues that these prisoners are the "worst of the worst" and deserve what they are getting. But as *human beings*, we need to be clear: NOBODY—no matter what they have done—deserves to be tortured. NOBODY deserves to be put in such extreme conditions of isolation where prison guards try to extinguish *everything that makes you human*, that keeps you physically and mentally alive, that connects you with the world and other people, that gives you a reason to live, to love, to learn and think. And this is not just being done in the SHU at Pelican Bay. There are tens of thousands of people in prisons throughout the U.S. caged up in maximum security units, subjected to this kind of torture.

Many of the prisoners have made it clear they are willing to die if their demands are not met. And what people on the outside do will be a big factor in what happens now, for good... or bad. In this kind of urgent, life and death situation, there can be *no excuse* for standing to the side. There is *no justification* for not joining the fight for these demands, for not taking a stand here in the interest of humanity.

Ask yourself this: What would it mean if people on the outside *don't* stand up and do everything they can to make sure these prisoners don't die, to really fight for these prisoners to be treated like human beings? What would this say about *our* humanity? But also, what will it mean if hundreds and thousands of people do stand up together, wage a determined struggle for the just demands of these prisoners, and in this way, assert our own humanity?

As a statement from prisoners in Corcoran Prison put it: "It is important for all to know Pelican Bay is not alone in this struggle and the broader the participation and support for this hunger strike and other such efforts, the greater the potential that our sacrifice now will mean a more humane world for us in the future."

NOBODY Deserves To Be Treated Like This

Close your eyes and imagine you're in a cell that's 8 x 10 feet—with no windows, no air, just concrete walls all around you. This tomb includes a slab of cement to sleep on, a toilet and sink. That's it. You're deprived of human contact. Your food is shoved through a slot in the door. You can't take a photo of yourself to send to your family. Maybe once a day, but maybe not, you are let out of this cell for one hour, into a space a little bigger, with a little bit more air. You are denied medical care. And if the guards decide you're not cooperating—for something as minor as not returning a food tray or banging on the door—a team of them, in full riot gear, with batons, handcuffs, will "extract" you from your cell, hogtie you and beat you with no mercy. You have been in this cell, subjected to this torture, for five years, or 10 years, or maybe 30 years, deprived of human contact, never feeling the sun, never seeing the sky or a blade of grass, never hearing a note of music.

This is life—or more accurately, a slow death—for 70,000 men and women who have been put in maximum security units in prisons all over the USA. This kind of solitary confinement

stands in violation of international human rights standards, including the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. This kind of sensory deprivation and lack of human contact is known to create severe psychological disorders, to literally drive people crazy. Putting an END to all this is what the hunger strikers at Pelican Bay State Prison are willing to die for.

Think about how prisoners *in these conditions* are on a hunger strike. Many of them have no way of even knowing what is happening outside of their cell. They have no way to communicate with each other and no way—or very limited ways—to talk with friends, family and supporters on the outside. Meanwhile prison officials have tried all kinds of ways to sabotage the strike—including lying to prisoners, telling them the strike is over, and trying to create divisions among the prisoners. And still, a hard core of the prisoners on hunger strike have remained strong and even more determined.

On Friday, July 14, Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity issued a press release reporting that the strikers at Pelican Bay had unanimously rejected a CDCR proposal to end the strike. According to PHSS, CDCR responded to the prisoners' five demands by distributing a vaguely worded document stating it would "effect a comprehensive assessment of its existing policy and procedure" about the security housing units—and this document gave no indication if any changes would be made at all. After this settlement document was distributed to all hunger strikers at Pelican Bay, some prisoners who had gone off the strike resumed refusing food.

This System Is the "Worst of the Worst"

This system wants people to believe these prisoners deserve what they are getting and that everyone else is safer because of this. Prison officials say this hunger strike just goes to show that these prisoners *should be* in the SHU. Terry Thornton, spokesperson for the CDCR, said, "That so many inmates in other prisons throughout the state are involved really demonstrates how these gangs can influence other inmates, which is one of the reasons we have security housing units in the first place." (*New York Times*, July 7, 2011)

But even the mainstream press has reported on how this hunger strike has united prisoners across different nationalities and others divisions which prison officials have always used to set prisoners against each other. The *New York Times* reported, "The hunger strike has transcended the gang and geographic affiliations that traditionally divide prisoners, with prisoners of many backgrounds participating."

The SHU at Pelican Bay is a prison within a prison. These supermax prisons were built, prison officials say, for the "worst of the worst." In fact, a huge percentage of prisoners are in the Pelican Bay SHU simply because prison officials have decided to "validate" them as affiliated with a gang. A prisoner can end up in the SHU because he has a certain tattoo or hangs out with someone who guards say is a gang member. A prisoner in the SHU can target another prisoner as a gang member—whether it is true or not—in order to get out of the SHU. A prisoner can end up in the SHU because they are rebellious, because they dare to think. A letter from a hunger striker at Pelican Bay to the Prisoners Revolutionary Literature Fund (PRLF) said:

"Just being a rebellious or progressive prisoner gets one targeted and labeled a 'gang member' and sent to Shu. The Shu is made out as a big stick to intimidate the prison population into passivity, (think deportation threats to migrants or the whip shown to the

slave). It doesn't mean it's going to be used but the thought of it existing is enough to control a large portion of the prison population so it becomes a tool not used for rehabilitation but for social control... It is these conditions where even reading material such as philosophy or history is censored. Pelican Bay Shu is designed to control, nothing more. We seen even *Revolution* newspaper being censored and banned from this prison at one time. Take a minute to think of living in a certain zip code or apartment building where city officials notify you that *Revolution* newspaper is banned and is not allowed in your neighborhood. How would you feel about these city officials? How would you feel about the system that upholds the actions of these city officials?"

In many ways this hunger strike is objectively exposing the complete *illegitimacy* of this system and the hypocrisy of the USA which goes around the world posing as the "leader of the free world" and the protector of democracy and human rights.

Step back and look at the bigger context of the courageous prisoners on a hunger strike and the conditions they are protesting:

How the system uses police murder and brutality, extreme repression, its laws and courts and prisons to maintain the oppressive economic and social relations in society, to maintain control over a section of the people it fears will rebel against their oppression.

This is a system that fears the *potential* of the millions of people for whom it has no future.

This is what has been behind the so-called "war on drugs" that, over several decades now, has criminalized generations of youth and led to mass incarceration—to a prison population in the USA of over 2.3 million, mostly Black and Latino men.

The demands of the prisoners are completely just. And an incredibly powerful statement is being sent out from behind the bars at Pelican Bay, joined by many in other prisons throughout the country. These prisoners are demanding to be treated like human beings, asserting their humanity and challenging everyone to respond with their own humanity. There is an urgent need for people from all walks of life to speak up with courage and determination to wage a fight to force the CDCR to meet the prisoners' just demands.

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