

Statements from Prominent People in Support of California Prison Hunger Strikers

By [Global Research](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

At the July 14 emergency meeting at Revolution Books in New York City on the Pelican Bay hunger strike, participants discussed the need to heighten awareness and support for the hunger strike among people on the outside to a new level – as part of forcing prison officials to meet the prisoners’ demands. One idea that came up was to contact prominent people, calling on them to write support statements and use their voice to spread the word. A letter was quickly written and sent out the next day. The following are initial statements written in response. More statements are urgently needed from other artists, public intellectuals, and prominent voices of conscience and should be sent to revbooksnyc@yahoo.com.

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Susan Sarandon:

I support the inmates of Corcoran State prison, pelican bay, and other prisons in their

demands to end the inhumane policies of SECURITY HOUSING UNITS. I recognize their humanity and stand with them.

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David Strathairn:

What does it portend for any citizen, incarcerated or not, if their OWN NATION is not held accountable for the violation of its OWN laws, specified in its Own Constitution, that deal with the humane treatment and conditions of incarceration? To continually allow, deny, ignore, even tacitly accept, these deplorable abuses can only lead to the ultimate breakdown of our justice system and the ascendancy of a society ruled by oppression and repression. It can only lead us further into a darkness in which no one person will be able to trust that they are equal under any law. That laws are only the bastinados of the rich and powerful. If we choose to think of ourselves as a just and humane people setting an example for others to follow, then to NOT speak out against this, is corrosively hypocritical. It breeds a communality of cynicism and shame and makes us all prisoners. Simply out of common decency and respect for each other, for the preservation of a fair and just society, the demands of these people must honored.

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Nawal El Saadawi, Cairo, Egypt:

I condemn the horrific conditions under which those prisoners live in the USA. We have a common global struggle against all types of class race gender and religious oppressions, including American-European imperialisms and neocolonialisms. We live in one world dominated by the same military police capitalist patriarchal system. We need to fight together. Unity is power globally and locally. Our Egyptian revolution is winning till today because of our unified power of millions (women men and children from all sectors of the society) who are staying in Tahrir Square day and night, and in all streets and squares all over Egypt from Aswan south to Alexandria north, and Suez Canal cities and villages.

In solidarity

(Nawal El Saadawi is a renowned Egyptian novelist, doctor, and feminist activist. She has been involved in the 2011 uprising in Egypt.)

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Saskia Sassen:

We have long known about the often extreme abuse of prisoners and violations of their most basic rights. Hundreds of prisoners are right now on the 15th day of a hunger strike—they would rather die than continue living with such brutality. We must, we need, we have to support their cause.

(Saskia Sassen is Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Co-Chair, Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University, New York City)

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Carl Dix, Revolutionary Communist Party, Served 2 years in Fort Leavenworth Military Prison for refusing to go to Vietnam in 1970:

The people on hunger strike in the prisons in California have stood up and declared that they are human beings, not animals, and that they refuse to submit to the torture being enforced by the California Dept of Corrections.

The hunger strikers have put their lives on the line to fight to achieve their demands, and we must support them. They are asserting their humanity and thru doing that, they are challenging us to reclaim our own humanity—by refusing to allow torture to be carried out in the prison system in our name.

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Sam Hamill, poet:

I join the inmates of Pelican Bay, Corcoran State and other prisons in their demands for humane treatment of all incarcerated people. I hope the American people will demand the same. The shameful injustice of our horrific treatment of inmates is an ugly stain on our national character.

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Kathleen Chalfant, actor and Henry Chalfant, filmmaker and photographer:

We are both appalled by the conditions at Pelican Bay and by the impossibly inhumane treatment given these prisoners in a so-called civilized society—there is simply no excuse.

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Father Luis Barrios, Ph.D.:

Greetings from the Texas-Mexico border: On my way to cross again to challenge the USA government illegal and immoral blockage to Cuba. I'm very sorry I can't be physically present in this solidarity action on behalf of our brothers who are incarcerated in California and that as a way of resisting injustices, human rights violations and oppression, they organize a hunger strike. This is a statement that I want you to make public.

As a priest, as a community activist and as a scholar in the field of criminal justice, these brothers have my support. What they are denouncing is a matter of human rights and human dignity violations. Tomorrow during mass here in Texas I'm going to address this matter to people in Austin, Texas. I also want to raise my voice and solidarity against the Prison Industrial Complex, the one that is responsible for keeping these men in prison. As a spiritual activist, I'm against this capitalist society that is building a class society that at the end produces this type of human segregation for the purpose of social control; incarceration. We know that in the USA rich people get richer and poor people go to prison. Let's start looking for alternative to incarceration.

In the mean time, we need to support unconditionally our brothers who are in prison in this hunger strike. This type of action in their behalf is only a symptom, let's deal with the real problems: a class society that produce oppression and exclusion.

In solidarity love, the most important sacrament.

(Father Luis Barrios, Ph.D., is Professor, John Jay College of Criminal Justice-Department of Latin American & Latina/o Studies; Member of Ph.D. faculties in social/personality psychology, Graduate Center-City University of New York; Visiting Professor of Research & Methodology and Criminal Justice; Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas: Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo-UASD and Universidad Iberoamericana-UNIBE, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

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Michael Steven Smith

Attorney at Law, New York, NY

Co-host Law and Disorder Radio, Board Member, The Center for Constitutional Rights*:

A society can be judged on how it treats the least amongst us. The conditions under which the prisoners at Pelican Bay in California are held under prolonged isolation, which induce the disintegration of the human personality, are plainly torturous and an assault on their humanity and an affront to ours. One Guantánamo was one indecency too many. The demands of the prisoners for humane treatment must be met.

* For identification only

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Kevin Zeese, It's Our Economy:

Prisoners are standing up for basic humane conditions, now people must stand with them and say prisoner abuse is unacceptable. The abuse these people are suffering is unacceptable and shows that the U.S. prison system needs major re-evaluation. For too long we have allowed prison conditions to deteriorate while prison populations have increased. It is time to reverse both trends—reduce prison populations and improve conditions—both need dramatic improvement.

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Margaret Flowers, M.D.:

I write to express support for the prisoners of California who are on a hunger strike to protest their inhumane conditions and treatment. A hunger strike is not something that is done lightly. This hunger strike has unified prisoners who are otherwise at odds with each other. It reflects the severity of their circumstances. Long-term solitary confinement causes permanent psychological harm. Abusive punishment, requiring prisoners to spy on each other and false accusation create an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Rather than healing and rehabilitation of the prisoners, these circumstances worsen their condition. I ask the prison authorities to negotiate in good faith with the prisoners. And I hope that the awareness of the situation will spark a broader movement to end the failed drug war and use evidence-based drug policy and to adopt modern prison policies based on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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Jay Wenk, Town Councilman, Woodstock, NY:

Those of us who fought in wars for Justice are appalled by the conditions in American prisons. I'm a combat vet of WW2, and I've seen the prison camps of the Third Reich. I've worked in prisons in New York State as a counselor and I've seen goon squads dragging their victims hastily out of sight behind curtains and doors. I don't know what the specific situation is in California, but when I hear that the authorities won't talk with their inmates, I suspect the worst, with good reason. The point is not whether or not these inmates are dangerous criminals, the point is that they are human beings, and must be listened to. This is what our Country is supposed to be about.

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Eleanor J. Bader, freelance writer, Brooklyn, NY:

The torture of prisoners in California is reprehensible. Prisoners are putting their lives at risk to protest the inhumane and degrading conditions they are subjected to. Their hunger strike is an act of desperation and I urge the prison authorities to listen to the demands and take action to end the torture and abuse within the state penal system.

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Joyce Kozloff, artist:

It's time for the State of California to begin negotiations with the prisoners, whose legitimate demands must be respected.

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Michel Chossudovsky

Professor of Economics (emeritus), University of Ottawa, Canada

Director/Directeur, Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal, Canada

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

I the undersigned have taken cognizance of the deplorable conditions prevailing in the California prison system including the hunger strike affecting 13 prisons involving more than 6,000 inmates.

These prevailing conditions constitute a crime against humanity and a violation of fundamental human rights.

The conditions of incarceration and deprivations are in blatant violation of the U.S. Constitution.

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Professor John Hutnyk

Academic Director, Center for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London:

Have circulated this widely and stand...

...in solidarity with hunger strikers in the California prison system, noting this also as a

warning for the UK, as the con-dem coalition moves to close, crowd and privatize prisons here. I was appalled to read of the conditions in California, and of course was reminded of all the campaigners that have fought so far, and are fighting still, against the racist, white supremacist, corporate (even when its State) prison-industrial-cultural complex that tortures, on camera or in secret, that abuses and insults, that has no legitimacy, that has no respect, that should be torn down.

Solidarity to all: we cannot be free here when there we are in chains.

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William Parker, Musician:

The general public has no idea of the horrific inhuman conditions that exist within the United States penal system. A system which has been a breeding ground for crime, violence and drugs. Change / Abolishment of the prison system is long over due. Act now!

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Jessica Blank:

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to express my solidarity with the prisoners striking for humane and decent basic conditions in Supermax prisons in California and elsewhere in the U.S. No human being—in the United States of America or anywhere else—should be subject to conditions (such as long-term solitary confinement, deprivation of basic nourishment, etc.) that have been widely shown to cause long-lasting harm and have been disavowed by human rights organizations around the world. The United States Constitution forbids cruel and unusual punishment, and it is my opinion—as well as the opinion of many others across our country and the world—that current conditions in American Supermax prisons are clearly in violation of this Constitutional provision. Even if a citizen has been convicted of a heinous crime in the U.S., he or she is still protected by the Constitution and by basic human rights laws. This is a foundational principle of our democracy. As a citizen, I urge you to do something to remedy this patently inhumane and unjust situation.

Sincerely,
Jessica Blank

(Jessica Blank is an actor, playwright, and novelist; she co-authored the play *The Exonerated*.)

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Boyce D. Watkins:

Many Americans believe that the dehumanization of incarcerated individuals has nothing to do with them. But the system affects all of us, as many of our families are devastated by the epidemic of mass incarceration. It helps all Americans to ensure that inmates are given access to education and other tools that will allow them to become productive members of society. Forcing inmates to languish in unspeakable conditions is not only inhumane, it makes America less safe for everyone. The prison system should make people better than

they were when they arrived, not worse.

(Boyce D. Watkins, author, economist, political analyst, and social commentator, currently at Syracuse University, has made regular appearances in the media, including CNN, *Good Morning America*, MSNBC, Fox News, BET, NPR, *Essence Magazine*, USA Today, *The Today Show*, ESPN, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show* and *CBS Sports*.)

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Kia Corthron, New York City, 7/16/11:

Personal Statement Regarding the 2011 California Prison Strikes

When a citizen of the United States is convicted in the criminal court system, the sentence is a number of days, or weeks, or months, or years. This separation from society is the penalty that is the understanding of jurors who reach a verdict to convict a defendant, and is the understanding of the defendant who made personal decisions regarding his or her plea.

Long-term solitary confinement is *not* a condition understood by the jury nor the defendant. The ill psychological consequences of such treatment have been affirmed by such diverse persons as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Senator John McCain, who spent three of his five-and-a-half POW years in segregation. The acute psychological adverse effects have been affirmed by Human Rights Watch, which has noted “Suicides occur disproportionately more often in segregation units than elsewhere in prison.”

The abolishment of such primitive practices is among the demands of the incarcerated currently on hunger strike in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) of California’s Pelican Bay prison, as well as of several thousand prisoners throughout the state. Other appeals seem no less reasonable: an end to group punishment, wherein all members of an assumed group are penalized for the actions of one; an end to the debriefing policy—a bribe of better meals or release from SHU to prisoners in exchange for incriminating information against their fellow inmates, which puts innocent and weaker prisoners at risk of being wrongly accused and punished; the provision of food that is adequate and nutritious, and permission for the inmates to purchase out of their own money vitamin supplements; and a handful of small requests that would boost prisoner morale and thus the inmates’ conduciveness to rehabilitation, such as a weekly phone call, hobby items (colored pencils, watercolors), and the allowance of the receipt of two packages per year.

In short, the hunger strikers, who have not eaten since July 1st, are living in such inhumane conditions that they are risking death in order to be treated with the smallest and most basic of dignities, a minimum of which are required to maintain sanity. For those of us on the outside who believe that the incarcerated are deserving of such psychological retribution, it must be remembered that these men may have long prison sentences but most are not lifers, and that their resultant compounded fury and madness will one day be unleashed on the greater society when they are released; it is therefore in all our interests to provide prisoners with the opportunity to rehabilitate. And for those of us on the outside who believe that the incarcerated are deserving of basic human dignities, it is appalling and tragic to discover through this uprising that such paltry demands have not been automatic in the 21st Century American prison system—the entity in *true* need of rehabilitation.

(Kia Corthron is a playwright living in New York City. Her plays have been produced in New York, London and in theatres across the U.S.)

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Frances Goldin, literary agent:

The United States does not need another Attica! Our prison system is archaic, racist and inhuman!

The prisoners demands are JUSTIFIED! Respond by granting their demands. Prison Reform is long overdue. Start today with California!

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Mike Ferner, Interim Director, Veterans For Peace:

If you've never been locked up, you cannot have a legitimate opinion about what kind of treatment prison inmates deserve. And that goes for everyone who has ever ignorantly said, "We don't owe these people a hotel room, you know."

If you have been locked up, you know that the Pelican Bay Hunger Strikers and the inmates joining them in other prisons are the most courageous people in this land. They are facing possible death and certain retribution from a system and from individuals who literally hold the power of life and death over them.

How many times have we driven past one of the rapidly-expanding number of prisons in our country, feeling a small twinge of the despair that smothers everything inside the razor wire? Usually our minds hurry to other concerns in the realm of the free, but now we are given the opportunity to take a moment and stand in support of our fellow human beings when it could really make a difference.

Please join me in writing to California Governor Jerry Brown, someone with a reputation for compassion and Matthew Cate, Secretary of the Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

We owe it to our own souls.

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Kathleen Barry, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Author of "Unmaking War, Remaking Men", Santa Rosa, California:

Your refusal to respond to the prisoner hunger strike begun on July 1, 2011 only confirms to the people of California the validity of the prisoners' allegations and demands. Your violation of prisoners human rights, their right to live free of cruelty and torture not only harms prisoners, threatens the lives of those on hunger strike to regain these rights but are a violation of international, national and state law. By your actions you debase all Californians and make clear that we live in a barbaric state.

We, the citizens of California, understand that what you are doing to these prisoners and your refusal to respond to the hunger strike violates the public trust we place in you to operate our prisons. You are neither above the law nor our scrutiny. We cannot allow you

to stay in positions of power and authority if you abuse them and violate the law as well as prisoners human rights. Therefore we ask that you immediately address the demands of those on hunger strike, see that they receive immediate medical treatment while you promulgate prison policy that is in line with the International Declaration of Human Rights that you are now violating as well as national and state law.

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