

The California Prison System. The Pelican Bay Prison Hunger Strikers: We Are Human Beings!

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“What is of note here and something that should concern all U.S. citizens, is the increasing use of behavioral control, i.e. Torture units and human experimental techniques against prisoners, not only in California but across the nation. Indefinite confinement, sensory deprivation, withholding food, constant illumination and use of unsubstantiated lies from informants are the psychological billy clubs being used in these torture units. The purpose of this ‘treatment’ is to stop prisoners from standing in opposition to inhumane prison conditions and prevent them from exercising their basic human rights.”

Statement of Solidarity with the Pelican Bay Collective Hunger Strike on July 1st and announcement of participation by Corcoran SHU prisoners

(from California Prison Watch, californiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com)

On Friday, July 1, prisoners in California’s infamous Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison began a courageous and determined hunger strike. This then, very quickly, turned into a display of collective outrage and solidarity among prisoners throughout the state and beyond.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) initially tried to say the strike was fewer than two dozen prisoners. But they then had to admit that by their own count, more than 500 inmates refused food at Pelican Bay State Prison and that 6,600 prisoners in 13 different prisons participated in the hunger strike on the weekend of July 2-3.

This is an extremely significant and extraordinary development, something that challenges people on “the outside” to sit up and take notice. Many have been moved to support the prisoners in their just demands.

The Pelican Bay SHU is designed to subject prisoners to solitary confinement, isolation and sensory deprivation—indefinitely. Some prisoners have been kept in these completely inhumane conditions for *years* and *decades*. And the prisoners in the SHU write that they are fighting to let the world know the brutal injustices being done to them; and that they are risking their lives to send out a message that they are human beings! That they refuse to be treated like animals.

One of the ways prison officials maintain control is by pitting prisoners against each other by race and ethnicity, and exploiting and promoting other divisions among prisoners. But this hunger strike is crossing barriers that usually divide prisoners—building unity to fight the horrendous conditions they all face. 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.”

A prisoner from Ohio writing in solidarity with the hunger strike said: “We are all a part of the same fabric of oppression within these walls; we all experience the same or similar conditions in some form or fashion. That’s why I believe it’s very necessary for us to come together, put down the knives for a moment & demand the kind of meaningful change needed to produce better conditions & to combat abusive ‘power holders’ in ways that foster collective resistance. Case in point—the brothas in Georgia (work stoppage demonstration) & the brothas out in Pelican Bay’s Security Housing Unit (SHU).” (Prison Hunger Strike Solidarity, prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com)

Solidarity Spreads

On the first day of the strike, 43 food trays were refused (out of 52) in Pod D1 of the Pelican Bay SHU. The nine prisoners who didn’t refuse to eat are reportedly much older with serious health concerns. Prisoners reported that other units had similar numbers of nearly 100% participation.

On the second day, the hunger strike spread into the General Population (GP). And prisoners at 13 of California’s prisons protested in solidarity with the hunger strike at Pelican Bay. At Corcoran and Folsom State prisons, more than 100 prisoners participated in the hunger strike. And a number of prisoners at the Ohio State Penitentiary refused their food trays for 24 hours.

Molly Porzig, a spokeswoman with the group Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, said, “They are protesting conditions that they say are torturous and inhumane. They feel the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will not make any meaningful or long-term change until they start dying, and they’re willing to take it there.” (thecrimereport.org/archive/2011-07-hung-strike-ca-folo, July 8, 2011)

According to reports, the CDCR began deliberately spreading disinformation that they hoped would make it seem like the strike was winding down or over. On Thursday, July 7, they said the number of prisoners refusing meals was 1,700 inmates at seven prisons.

First of all, as of July 9, according to prison activists following the situation, at least 2,000 prisoners at 11 California prisons were on hunger strike. There is a hard-core group of 50 prisoners in the highest-security special isolation wing in the SHU who say they will refuse to eat until their demands are met. And it is very significant that over 6,600 prisoners in many different prisons refused to eat in the first few days, in solidarity with the hunger strike at Pelican Bay.

A statement from prisoners in the SHU at Corcoran Prison said:

“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.” (From commondreams.org/newswire/2011/07/05-6)

On July 4, the website prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.com reported: “Prisoners across the US are showing their solidarity with the Pelican Bay SHU Prisoners by joining the hunger strike for varying lengths of time (like Corcoran, Folsom, CCI Tehachapi, Calipatria and Centinela

State Prisons in CA and Ohio State Penitentiary), or by bravely writing statements, letters, or calling people outside to relay messages to the Pelican Bay hunger strikes.” It went on to say, on July 7, that “*Thousands* of prisoners have come together in solidarity with the prisoners at Pelican Bay SHU, while being locked up in brutal conditions themselves. This massive resistance and support is a testament to people’s undying will and ability to build collective power in the face of disappearance and death.”

The Demands

The prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU are protesting inhumane conditions of torture—which includes complete isolation for 22 1/2 hours a day in windowless cells. They have five demands, including an end to long-term solitary confinement, collective punishment, and the practice of “debriefing,” which amounts to forced interrogation on gang affiliation.

One of the main reasons prisoners get sent to the SHU is because prison officials label them as affiliated with a gang. And once a prisoner is put in the SHU, just about the only way they can get out is through “debriefing.” Many prisoners are put in the SHU simply because they have been labeled as gang members (by prison officials or another prisoner); and then the way these prisoners can get out of the SHU is to get “debriefed,” to give information (that can be totally false) that is used to target other prisoners; those that have been “informed on” are then put in the SHU. Other demands include decent food, rehabilitation and education programs, warmer clothing and a phone call each week.

The SHU is a “prison within prison” where prison officials and guards—not juries—determine that a prisoner will be put in conditions of isolation. And this is not just going on at Pelican Bay—many other prisons in California and all over the country have similar maximum-security, extreme-isolation units where prisoners face vicious brutality and physical and psychological torture.

The statement from prisoners at Corcoran said:

“All of the deprivations (save access to sunlight); outlines in the five-point hunger strike statement are mirrored, and in some instances intensified here in the Corcoran SHU 4B/1CC Section isolation gang unit. Medical care here, in a facility allegedly designed to house chronic care and prisoners with psychological problems, is so woefully inadequate that it borders on intentional disdain for the health of prisoners, especially where diabetics and cancer are an issue. Access to the law library is denied for the most mundane reasons or, most often, no reason at all. Yet these things and more are outlined in the P.B.S.P. SHU five core demands.” (from California Prison Watch, californiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com)

The System Strikes Back

The kind of torture that goes on every day in U.S. prisons is something most people have been totally unaware of. And the system has done all it can to wage a huge ideological battle to convince people that prisoners are getting just what they deserve and that putting these criminals in prison makes things safe for “the rest of us.”

But this hunger strike has the potential to spur millions of people to learn about the horrific realities of life in these prison hellholes. There is the potential for many of those “on the outside” to feel compelled to speak out against what is being done to prisoners. And reports indicate this hunger strike can provide a platform for the prisoners, as well as their families,

to rally others to fight for the rights of prisoners, not just in this strike, but as an ongoing struggle.

One of the ways the system justifies what it does to prisoners is to put a gang label on them—which essentially puts them in the category of the “worst of the worst” who don’t deserve to be treated like human beings. Terry Thornton from the CDCR said: “The department is not going to be coerced or manipulated. 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 to this we have to say: no matter what they have done—or *not* done, no human being deserves to be treated like this; no human being should be treated like an animal; no human being should be tortured and subjected to isolation and sensory deprivation that will drive them crazy. And anyone on the outside with an ounce of humanity should expose and fight against what is being done to the prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU and other maximum security torture chambers throughout the USA.

Civil rights groups have reported that the CDCR has refused to negotiate with the hunger strikers, even though advocates for the prisoners have a representative team in place. And Carol Strickman of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children says there have been reports that the CDCR is violating a federal mandate by canceling some or all medication to hunger striking prisoners. This is not only illegal but an especially cruel form of punishment against prisoners who are fighting to be treated like human beings.

Thornton has also claimed that the prisoners have other ways of having their demands heard. She said, “There are appropriate ways of registering your concerns, and even though this hunger strike has been peaceful, this is not the way to register those concerns.” (sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/07/08/BA9U1K7SE3.DTL)

But many prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison remember what happened in June 2001, when over 1,000 prisoners at Pelican Bay and other SHU prisons went on a hunger strike for two weeks. That strike was ended when the CDCR agreed to re-evaluate cases of “gang validation.” And now, 10 years later, the prisoners are still protesting the whole unjust practice of debriefing.

Prisoners in Corcoran Prison—another site of the torture of prisoners in California—issued a statement of support that said, “When approved means of protest and redress of rights are proven meaningless and are fully exhausted, then the pursuit of those ends through other means is necessary.” (sfbayview.com/2011/Corcoran-shu-prisoners-join-pelican-bay-hunger-strike)

“We are human beings!”

These prisons within prisons were started in the 1960s—for what prison officials called the “worst of the worst.” These SHUs were used to isolate and punish political prisoners. And for many decades now, thousands of prisoners have suffered in these torture chambers. And the system, through its officials, politicians, mainstream media, etc. has constantly justified this, saying that these prisoners have no one to blame but themselves; that they deserve to be treated like this; that society is a better place because they are locked up; that those on the outside should be glad that they are behind bars.

But first of all, we have to ask, what kind of a system is it that now incarcerates over 2.3 million people—the majority Black and Latino? What does it mean that the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world?

This is a system that uses mass incarceration as a way to control the people. This is a system that for decades has carried out a so-called War on Drugs that is really a war on the people that has targeted a huge section of society and determined that they will live their lives behind bars, with no rights, with no chance to have an education, to see their families, to contribute to society in any way.

There are the thousands of prisoners who will spend most or all of their life in prison—not because they did a violent or horrendous crime, but because of mandatory sentencing laws and things like the “three strikes” rule which means you can be given long sentences for something relatively minor, if it is your third felony. This is a system that uses its state power—its laws, police, courts, bureaucracy and prisons—to repress and control the masses of people; to enforce the oppressive economic and social relations in this society, including the new ways Black people and other minorities are systematically oppressed.

Many *innocent* people are put behind bars, their lives ruined. Think of the fact that there have been many prisoners that have spent decades behind bars, sometimes on death row, before it turns out that they were framed up and railroaded, forced to confess to something they didn’t do, or found guilty on the basis of a prisoner who gave false information in order to make a deal with prison officials.

These striking prisoners are going up against a lot, they are risking a lot. And their actions aim to challenge everyone else to think about what this means. *Revolution* is hearing from many people who are inspired by how they are standing up—shining a light on and demanding an END to the way they are being tortured.

This hunger strike has the potential to impact how people look at prisons and prisoners, and the mass incarceration of millions. It can open people’s eyes to the horrible injustices that are going on—and cause them to reject the system’s justifications for their torture chambers. It can contribute to creating more favorable conditions for struggle against all the different ways the system oppresses the people. This struggle can shake up and challenge those who say “this is the way things are and you can’t change it.”

The solidarity statement from Corcoran prisoners (from California Prison Watch, californiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com) brings all this out sharply:

“Our indefinite isolation here is both inhumane and illegal and the proponents of the prison industrial complex are hoping that their campaign to dehumanize us has succeeded to the degree that you don’t care and will allow the torture to continue in your name. It is our belief that they have woefully underestimated the decency, principles and humanity of the people. Join us in opposing this injustice without end. Thank you for your time and support.”

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