

The California Prisoners Hunger Strike. The Truth

Responding to Jeffrey Beard, head of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)

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Four weeks ago, 30,000 people in prisons in California and surrounding states went on a hunger strike to protest their conditions, in particular in Security Housing Units (called SHU's). Currently, there are hundreds still going without food, they are losing weight, being sent to the hospital and one has even died since this began.

In an opinion piece published in the August 6 *Los Angeles Times*, Jeffrey Beard, head of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), argues that this hunger strike is not about protesting living conditions that constitute torture, but is instead prison gangs attempting to "restore their ability to terrorize fellow prisoners, prison staff and communities throughout California." He went on to defend the conditions of those in the SHU and argued this was not solitary confinement and therefore, not torture. ("[Hunger strike in California prisons is a gang power play](#)," August 6, 2013)

His Op-ed is deceitful and it is very calculatedly designed to make millions of people who might support those risking their lives on the hunger strike instead see the hunger strikers as animals, criminals and gangsters with an inexplicable "agenda of violence" who deserve whatever punishment they get. And it's aimed at putting the imprisoned millions, their family members and those who've experienced incarceration feel isolated, alienated and put on the defensive.

But we should also take note of the fact that Beard has been driven to write this because of the hundreds who have expressed their determination to continue this hunger strike and because of the broad support these prisoners have garnered, including from voices of prominence. People are raising big questions about the nature of America's prison system, and are linking it up to broader questions in society. This is why Beard felt compelled to go on the attack. While we should refute these lies, we should also take heart and redouble our efforts to expose what this system is doing and to have these prisoners' backs.

In Beard's op-ed, he plays on consciously crafted public opinion about "irredeemable criminals" we should be glad are locked away. But the deeper reality is that it is this system that is criminal and without legitimacy. It is this system that is committing crimes against humanity, torturing tens of thousands of people within its own borders and turning generation after generation of Black and Latino youth into suspects before they have even grown their full height. It locks people into conditions where they are set against each other, blames them for reacting in ways this system trains them to react and then

condemns them further when they put their lives on the line to rise above this and assert their humanity.

We intend to get into this further in this statement but, before we do, we need to speak to and unravel some of Beard's lies.

The SHU's Are Solitary Confinement, Solitary Confinement Is Torture

Despite their claims of being the home of freedom and democracy, America has been exposed as a state that enforces and condones torture. This is a source of increasing illegitimacy in the eyes of millions and millions around the world.

Think about what was exposed in pictures from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq where soldiers were photographing themselves with prisoners in poses of sexual degradation and violence. This was standard operating procedure, and the soldiers felt perfectly comfortable bragging about this and sharing these pictures with friends back home. Think about what's been exposed about Guantanamo where prisoners on hunger strike to demand an end to their torturous conditions are being further tortured through brutal force feeding. [To get an understanding of how intolerable this is, watch the [video from rapper Yasiin Bey](#) (Mos Def) where he undergoes the process of force feeding and can only withstand a couple minutes of what is normally a two hour procedure which happens twice a day.] Think about what it tells you that Attorney General Holder had to pre-emptively promise Russia that the U.S. wouldn't kill or torture Edward Snowden if they sent him back to the U.S. (Snowden is a heroic whistleblower who has exposed the U.S.' massive spying program and sought asylum in Russia.)

This torture was and is official U.S. policy, but given how the U.S. sends its armies to maraud all around the world in the name of democracy and human rights, it goes a long way to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. around the world to be seen that way.

So what about Beard's claim that the SHU's are not solitary confinement and are therefore not torture? This is a bald-faced lie.

Over 10,000 prisoners are now in one form or another of solitary confinement in California alone, some for decades. According to the United Nations, solitary confinement is defined as any regime where an inmate is held in isolation from others (except guards) for at least twenty-two hours a day. At Pelican Bay in northern California, prisoners are locked into 11 by 7 foot cell 22½ hours every day. At other SHU's in the state, the cement boxes are all about the same size. Prisoners sleep on a concrete slab of cement. Food is often rotten and barely edible; clocks, playing cards, and chessboards are banned. Prisoners spend 1 hour a day outside, alone, in a 16 by 25 foot concrete box with only a small patch of sky visible. Prison staff and prisoners call this the "dog run."

There is no meaningful human physical contact. All personal visits are separated by a barrier. Personal visits are also restricted due to the long distance family members have to travel to these prisons in far flung areas throughout the state. Often, even contact with medical, mental, or other staff takes place behind barriers.

These are conditions intended to break people and are recognized by people all around the world, including medical and psychiatric professionals, as one of the cruelest forms of torture. Sandra Schank, a staff psychiatrist at Mule Creek Prison said, "It's a standard

psychiatric concept, if you put people in isolation, they will go insane...” One of the most telling statistics of the psychological impact of solitary confinement is that half of the prisoners who commit suicide are those in isolation units, like the SHU, while they only make up 5% of the prison population.

The sentence in the SHUs are not given through due process, but a relatively arbitrary decision of prison officials. People are “validated” into the SHU’s through claims of gang association. But this association can be determined by the artwork on your walls, having a picture taken with someone who is claimed to be a gang member or even what books you read (revolutionary literature is on the list of official gang literature). And it is incredibly difficult to get out of the SHU. One prisoner wrote to *Revolution* newspaper, “There are three ways out of the SHU, parole, debrief or die.” Debriefing is a process where you snitch on others which lands them in the SHU. One prisoner described this as a vicious cycle where people end up getting put in by people desperate to get out. These are some of the things being protested through this hunger strike.

This is the reality. The painful and brutal, inhumane reality. This is well documented and is the lived experience of many tens of thousands of people whose voices we never hear, whose experiences we never learn from, whose lives we are told don’t count.

WHY Is This Happening?

Why has this kind of systematic torture become a necessary part of their program of mass incarceration?

Mass incarceration is not, as Beard would have you believe, a response to the explosion of gang violence in the 1970s and 80s. Mass incarceration is about the social control of whole sections of people this system has no future for. It developed as both conscious policy and the spontaneous workings of a system built on white supremacy, the oppression of Black people and other oppressed nationalities.

Revolution newspaper has written extensively about how the development of mass incarceration is a product of the workings of the system of capitalism in the U.S.... How and why this system went from slavery to Jim Crow with the violent enforcement of racial codes, white supremacy and new forms of slavery through convict labor and sharecropping. And how this gave rise to the New Jim Crow—police brutality, murder, criminalization and mass incarceration, legalized forms of discrimination but this time under the guise of supposed color-blindness. To find out more, go to revcom.us

In talking about the situation that gave rise to this New Jim Crow, a special issue of *Revolution* newspaper, [“From the Hellholes of Incarceration to a Future of Emancipation”](#) walks it through this way:

“Factories producing goods were moved first from the inner cities to the suburbs and then to other countries—while the masses of Black people remained locked in those urban cores due to continued housing segregation and deprivation. Simultaneously, the inner cities were deprived of funds and allowed to become economic and cultural dead-zones. The drug trade and the gangs involved in that trade to a certain degree arose spontaneously—but they were also systematically manipulated and in some cases promoted to fill the economic and political void left in the ghettos and barrios by economic abandonment and counter-revolutionary suppression of the movement. That escalated in the 1980s, as the CIA

orchestrated the funding of pro-U.S. Central American terrorists (the “Contras”) through the sale and distribution of drugs through gangs in the inner cities of the U.S. (See [“The CIA/Crack Connection: RW Interview with Gary Webb.”](#) at revcom.us, and *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*, by Gary Webb).

“The rulers used all this, along with other attacks, to create a ‘pariah class*’ in the inner cities—that is, social outsiders for whom normal considerations and rights did not apply. And they in turn used the presence of that pariah class as an outlet and target for the resentments building up among a large section of white people, many of whom were also facing economic setback and instability, re-fitting and reinforcing the ‘tool’ of white racism for these times.” [**The concept of the targeting of Black people and Native Americans as a “pariah class,” dating back to the early days of the U.S., and the overall way in which white supremacy has served to blunt class-consciousness in the U.S. since then, has been drawn on and further developed by Bob Avakian in the important work, Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy.*]

Millions of people’s eyes were opened to the mass criminalization of generations of youth with the murder of Trayvon Martin—a 17 year old Black youth who was walking home from the store when he was murdered by George Zimmerman. There is only one reason Zimmerman saw Trayvon Martin as a dangerous threat to begin with, only one reason he followed this young man wearing a hoodie through a rainy night--because George Zimmerman has been trained to view all Black youth as criminals and suspects above all else. And once again, this has been backed up and legalized by the state.

Along with the changes in the development of capitalism described above, this mass incarceration plays a role of counter-insurgency against a whole people this system has and continues to forcibly oppress and whose system has developed and made great use of white supremacy as part of its social glue.

The 1960s were a time of revolutionary upheaval with a Black liberation struggle that rocked this system to its foundations. This came together with revolutionary movements around the world, a revolutionary culture, challenging of traditional gender roles and other oppressed people’s rising up all over the world. These struggles impacted all of society, including inside the prisons. Thousands of people went from “criminal-minded to revolutionary-minded.” While some reforms were forced from this system, it was also met with brutal and bloody repression. Revolutionaries in prison, like George Jackson, who went through this transformation were murdered while others faced more prison time for their revolutionary activities. In 1971, during the Attica prison rebellion, at least 39 people were murdered (prisoners and prison guards) by state troopers and the national guard.

Black people across the country—including in prison—met the support of people all around the world. While these were revolutionary times, there was not a revolution, and once those movements ebbed and were crushed, this system has forcibly maintained the forms of oppression and exploitation that it is built on, if in different forms. In relation to Black people, and other oppressed nationalities, they’ve done this principally through mass repression, incarceration and criminalization. Actually, some of the first prisoners in maximum security prisons and SHUs (Security Housing Units) were political prisoners, revolutionaries who went through transformations in their outlook and became determined not to be fighting against each other, but to be fighting for a better world.

This kind of mass criminalization requires dehumanization and degradation, creating a

situation where everyone—including those suffering from all this—see themselves as the ones to blame. Torture contributes to this mass dehumanization.

Alan Goodman in *Revolution* newspaper concentrated the role and definition of torture: “Let’s make it plain: torture is, literally and in essence, a crime against humanity. Like rape, it is a systematic attempt to violently degrade people and rob them of their very humanity. Any government which not only tolerates such things but which, from its highest offices, justifies and insists on them as ‘instruments of policy’... any government which does not, once this has been exposed, prosecute the perpetrators but instead provides them in advance with immunity...reveals itself as a system that requires such crimes, and such criminals, for its functioning. Any people that does not resist such crimes, and demand prosecution of the torturers and, even more so, those who formulated the policy at the highest levels, reveals themselves to be complicit in those crimes. And in passively allowing the humanity of others to be degraded and attacked, they lose their own.” ([“The Torture Memos ... And the Need for Justice,”](#) *Revolution*, May 17, 2009)

What Is Actually Revealed by the Prisoners on Hunger Strike?

To back up his argument, Beard quotes a prisoner saying about the hunger strike that “The objective was to get into the general population, or mainline, and start running our street regiments again.” He quotes another that “We knew we could tap big time support through this tactic, but we weren’t trying to improve the conditions in the SHU; we were trying to get out of the SHU to further our gang agenda on the mainline.”

But Beard does not quote anything from those who initiated the hunger strike. He did not quote or even cite the concrete demands put forward by those who initiated the hunger strike. He did not quote any of the very moving letters from prisoners themselves about how they may die in this fight but are determined to end this for future generations to come. (It is also almost never the case that the media are allowed to interview prisoners in the SHU except those who have agreed to debrief or snitch on other prisoners, so it would make sense they would say things to defend their actions instead of speaking to the more overall reality.)

Here are the words of just one prisoner: “A hunger strike is not taken lightly by us, we are not suicidal, rather we hope to save lives. We may not be able to save our lives. But we have come to identify our existence in SHU as a conveyor belt leading into an oven of inferno. And we may indeed be strapped onto this conveyor belt with no way out as we have continued for years to watch our comrades fall into the abyss of the oven in psychosis, suicide or other chronic illness. And we may not be able to stop our ride from dropping us into the abyss but we will stop this conveyor belt for future generations to come. Today this ride stops!”

A number of prisoners have drawn connections between what they’re suffering and what prisoners in Guantánamo are suffering. One prisoner writes from Pelican Bay, “We sit here in windowless cells and held in solitary but we have begun to learn more about what is taking place and a couple of men have even begun to hunger strike in solidarity with Guantánamo because what we have realized is that the thing that links Pelican Bay SHU with Guantánamo is we share the same torturer.”

The fact that Beard decries “gang control” in prison is complete and utter hypocrisy. Anyone who knows anything about the basic functioning of prison knows they rely on and further

enforce gang divisions as a form of brutal control. From the moment you enter prison, you are slotted by nationality or where you're from. You get told where you will eat, sleep and exercise. You get told when your visiting days will be and when you can use the phone based on these racial divisions. And the prison guards foment conflict based on these divisions. In the late 90s it was exposed that in the Corcoran SHU they were organizing "gladiator days" where prisoners from different gangs were put into the exercise pen and told to fight each other, with armed prison guards watching and betting on the outcome. They foment and enforce these divisions and then set people up to go at each other.

Ever further, ask yourself this: if the prison authorities are so worried about prison gangs and the division among the prisoners, why wouldn't they celebrate the inspiring [Agreement to End Hostilities](#) released by a multinational group of prisoners in Pelican Bay's SHU which called for an end to all hostilities between different nationalities within California's prisons and jails? Instead, they are claiming this is part of an attempt for further gang control.

Think about what this means: for decades people have fought to maintain their sanity in conditions that regularly make people insane. In the scramble to survive, people have held onto meaningless divisions among people, finding refuge in "your kind alone," finding a foothold in the desire to be top dog in a dog-eat-dog situation. The whole setup in prison serves to foster and enforce the ways and thinking bound up with people being played against each other.

In the face of all this, first tens of thousands of people inside and now hundreds have said NO. NO! They will stand together against this criminal torture, they will foster unity and not divisions among people, they will risk their lives for this. In the words of a prisoner the day after the hunger strike began, "We just started tha hunger strike, was surprised so many people was on board. Asians, Blacks, whites, Hispanic. It's a beautiful thing."

How has this system responded? More repression and criminalization.

It reveals the complete bankruptcy of a system that has no future for generations of Black and Latino youth except confining them into inner cities without hope of employment, flooding these neighborhoods with drugs, setting people against each other, pumping out a culture and morality whose sole purpose is to hammer home the need to "get rich or die trying" in a capitalist system where that can only be done at the expense of others just like you.

Then blames these youth and incarcerates them in huge numbers when they act in the ways this system has confined, shaped and set them up to act. Warehousing hundreds of thousands of people in prison and torturing them, and threatening them with torture once they are inside. And when they fight to lift their heads and come together to step out of this: further brutality and criminalization.

[Click here](#) for more on the California Prisoners' Hunger Strike, including letters from Prisoners and interviews with psychologists and researchers familiar with the conditions.

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