

The Prisoner Hunger Strike: A Real Inspiration, A Real Beginning

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“It’s very important that our supporters know where we stand, and that CDCR [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation] knows that we’re not going to go for any B.S. We remain as serious about our stand now as we were at the start, and mean what we said regarding an indefinite hunger strike peaceful protest until our demands are met. I repeat—we’re simply giving CDCR a brief grace period in response to their request for the opportunity to get [it] right in a timely fashion! We’ll see where things stand soon enough!”

Todd Ashker, one of the hunger strike leaders at Pelican Bay Prison, in a letter dated July 24, 2011

Prisoners in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in California’s Pelican Bay State Prison led a three-week hunger strike, from July 1 to July 20, demanding an end to the barbaric, inhumane conditions of solitary confinement.

Leaders of the hunger strike described how this courageous act of resistance sent sparks, not only to other prisons, but to many people on the outside. In a statement dated July 22 they said:

“Many inmates across the state heard about our protest and rose to the occasion in a solid show of support and solidarity, as did thousands of people around the world! Many inmates put their health and lives on the line; many came close to death and experienced medical emergencies. All acted for the collective cause and recognized the great potential for forcing change on the use of SHU units across the country.” (See “Declaring a Victory & Ongoing Struggle by the Short Corridor Collective, a small representative of the Hunger Strike Leaders at Pelican Bay,” [Revolution #241](#), July 31, 2011.)

This statement explained that the decision to end the strike was made after top level prison administrators met with some of the hunger strike leaders, as well as their mediators, and “agreed to accede to a few small requests immediately, as a tangible good faith gesture in support of their assurance that all of our other issues will receive real attention, with meaningful changes being implemented over time.” The statement then goes on to say, “[W]hile the hunger strike is over, the resistance/struggle to end our subjection to (SHU) human rights violations and torture is just beginning!”

It took time for this news to get to other prisons and the hunger strike continued in a few prisons for a while. Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity reports that as far as they know, all of the prisoners who participated in the strike are no longer refusing food. But this struggle is

clearly far from over.

In a letter dated July 24, hunger strike leader Todd Ashker says that they are giving the CDCR two to three weeks from July 20 to come up with some substantive changes in response to their five core demands—and that if the CDCR does not follow through, prisoners at Pelican Bay plan to go back on hunger strike. (See “Prisoners at Pelican Bay SHU Announce Hunger Strike,” *Revolution #237*, June 26, 2011, to read the five demands.)

A Powerful Message and Call to Act

For weeks, even after many of the hunger strikers became dangerously ill, CDCR officials had refused to even consider the prisoners’ demands. They denied reports from the prisoners themselves, and their families and supporters, that some of those participating in the hunger strike were in a very critical state and could possibly die. CDCR statements to the press adamantly repeated the lie that the hunger strike was organized by gangs and that the prisoners’ demands were unwarranted. The governor of California refused to make any statement about the hunger strike. There was very little coverage of this in the national news.

But the courage and determination of the hunger strikers continued. Support for them grew across the U.S. and internationally. There were protests, press conferences, and organizing meetings. Families with loved ones in prison stepped forward to speak out. Many organizations and individuals wrote statements in support of the prisoners’ demands. In response to a call put out by Revolution Books and others, more than 60 prominent people, including well-known actors, intellectuals, artists, and musicians wrote statements supporting the hunger strike.

After weeks of refusing to negotiate and insisting the prisoners are less than human, the CDCR was effectively forced to meet with some of the hunger strike leaders and offer a deal.

The hunger strike shined a damning light on the fact that prisoners at Pelican Bay are being tortured—kept in windowless cells for 23 hours a day, denied human contact, subjected to routine brutal “cell extractions” where they are beaten down by squads of guards. And because of this, many more people also became aware of the fact that tens of thousands of prisoners in maximum security prisons all over the USA are being subjected to the barbaric cruelty of solitary confinement.

In an insightful op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, titled “Barbarous Confinement,” Colin Dayan writes:

“As early as 1995, a federal judge, Thelton E. Henderson, conceded that so-called ‘supermax’ confinement ‘may well hover on the edge of what is humanly tolerable,’ though he ruled that it remained acceptable for most inmates. But a psychiatrist and Harvard professor, Stuart Grassian, had found that the environment was ‘strikingly toxic,’ resulting in hallucinations, paranoia and delusions. In a ‘60 Minutes’ interview, he went so far as to call it ‘far more egregious’ than the death penalty.”

Leaders of the hunger strike stated that the decision to take this action was not made on a whim. They said, “It came about in response to years of subjection to progressively more primitive conditions and decades of isolation, sensory deprivation and total lack of normal

human contact, with no end in sight. This reality, coupled with our prior ineffective collective filing of thousands of inmate grievances and hundreds of court actions to challenge such blatantly illegal policies and practices... led to our conclusion that a peaceful protest via hunger strike was our only available avenue to expose what's really been going on here in CDCR-SHU prisons and to force meaningful change."

Indeed, for those who already knew about the inhumane horror of solitary confinement, it presented a real necessity, as well as an opportunity, to stand with the prisoners, support their demands and build a much bigger and growing movement against the inhumanity of solitary confinement. And for those who didn't know about the fact that torture is being carried out every single day in U.S prisons... now, they know... and now, they can't say, "I didn't know."

The courageous action of the prisoner hunger strikers brought the atrocity of solitary confinement to the light of day. A much broader section of society became aware of the fact that many prisoners are put in such conditions not because of any crime, but simply because prison authorities had "validated" them as gang members. Many more people learned about the CDCR's "debriefing" policy, where one of the only ways to get out of the SHU is to give information (true or false) to validate another prisoner.

Through this struggle, the prisoners broke down a lot of the barriers that have kept them apart; they defied divisions that prison officials foment and use to pit people against each other. At Pelican Bay, and in other prisons as well, the hunger strike united prisoners of different nationalities. In the most isolated and repressive conditions, and in the face of prison officials spreading disinformation, they were able to unite and organize within Pelican Bay Prison and beyond. And they were able to powerfully get their message to people on the outside.

Because of all this, in an even sharper way, people on the outside have now been confronted with the moral responsibility to take a stand, to support the prisoners' demands, and actively join the struggle to put an end to this intolerable situation. These prisoners are demanding to be treated like human beings, asserting their humanity and challenging everyone to respond with their own humanity. As many of the statements written in support of the hunger strike stressed, no human being, no matter what they have done, deserves this kind of treatment. No human being should be tortured.

The Illegitimacy of a System that Tortures

Supporting Colin Dayan's call to action is a letter sent to me recently by a Pelican Bay Prison hunger striker. In the letter, the hunger striker said he was told in 2001 upon transfer to Pelican Bay that he was "a cancer to be cut out" and that he would "die here one way or another." He said that in 2003 he found mixed in among his legal materials an administrative memo entitled "The Function of the Control/SHU Units." It outlined a plan of attack for administrators to follow.

The memo said "the function is to reduce prisoners to the state of submission essential for their ideological conversion ... that failing, the next step is to reduce them to a state of psychological incompetence sufficient to neutralize them as efficient self-directed antagonists ... that failing, the only alternative is to destroy them, preferably by making them desperate enough to destroy themselves."

Letter to the New York Times editor from Carol Strickman, staff attorney for Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and staff to the mediation team representing the hunger strikers

Because of the prisoner hunger strike, very ugly things are coming out about what goes on in the USA—things that have been hidden, that have not been widely known. This has presented the U.S. prison system, and the whole system it is part of, with the need to respond. This too, is a significant accomplishment of the hunger strike. And there are indications here of real concern, on the part of ruling class figures, about how the barbarity of solitary confinement is calling into question the legitimacy of the system.

While the New York Times was mainly silent for most of the hunger strike, it ran Colin Dayan's op-ed piece on July 17. And after the strike ended, on July 24, there were four "letters to the editor," under the subhead, "The Inhumanity of Solitary Confinement"—all, agreeing in some way with Dayan's commentary. One letter said:

"When they enter their windowless, fluorescent-lighted workplace through clanging iron gates, lock up inmates behind steel doors with no openings or contours other than a service port and a tiny window of layered fiberglass; and when the tools of their trade are manacles—heavy, solid ones, wrapped and interlocked around wrists, ankles and waist—then one can be sure that eye never meets eye. And no one escapes.

"'Outside,' too, eyes remain averted, with no less effect on the soul. That should haunt us all."

Then on August 1, the New York Times ran an editorial titled "Cruel Isolation" which started out:

"For many decades, the civilized world has recognized prolonged isolation of prisoners in cruel conditions to be inhumane, even torture. The Geneva Conventions forbid it. Even at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where prisoners were sexually humiliated and physically abused systematically and with official sanction, the jailers had to get permission of their commanding general to keep someone in isolation for more than 30 days.

"So Americans should be disgusted and outraged that prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes for months or even years, has become a routine form of prison management. It is inflicting unnecessary, indecent and inhumane suffering on tens of thousands of prisoners."

The New York Times is the most prestigious mainstream newspaper in the U.S. and represents the views of the liberal section of the U.S. ruling class. And its treatment of the hunger strike reflects real concerns that what is being revealed by this struggle is stirring outrage among broad sections of people, here and around the world, and calling into question the legitimacy of the system itself. Yet there are other forces within the ruling class who staunchly defend what is being done to prisoners and mass incarceration as a whole.

This contradiction was reflected in a recent Supreme Court ruling which condemned conditions in California prisons as cruel and unusual punishment—and was vociferously objected to by the rightwing conservative judges on the court. A dissenting opinion, written by Antonin Scalia, demonized those in prison, railing that the court ruling would release "fine physical specimens who have developed intimidating muscles pumping iron in the

prison gym.”

The torture of prisoners in solitary confinement is in sharp conflict with the professed “ideals” of the United States. People living in the U.S. are constantly told they live in the “best, most democratic, most egalitarian country.” They’re told we now live in a “post-racial” society. They’re told these prisoners are the “worst of the worst,” deserve what they get and have only themselves to blame for their situation. Especially those in the middle class, but the basic people as well, are influenced by these lies. But when people actually see what the government is doing to its people; how it has demonized and criminalized a whole section of society, especially Black youth; how it is torturing tens of thousands of prisoners—people can begin to question the very legitimacy of “their government.”

The U.S. goes around the world claiming to be the “leader of the free world” and model for every other country. Yet, increasingly, the U.S. is becoming known as the leader in torture, from Abu Ghraib to Pelican Bay. And add this to the fact that many people around the world condemn the U.S. for its use of the death penalty, for being the country with the highest rate of incarceration, for carrying out a “war on drugs” that has led to a situation where 2.3 million people are behind bars, mostly Black and Latino.

The outrage of mass incarceration in the U.S. and the inhumanity of solitary confinement say a lot about the system we live under. It is extremely important for growing numbers of people to not only become aware of these crimes of the system—but to build mass political resistance against this intolerable situation. Through this the political consciousness, organization, and fighting capacity of the people can grow. And this can contribute to many more people seeing the complete illegitimacy of the established order of things, understanding it doesn’t have to be this way, and joining the movement for revolution, to bring into being a completely different and truly liberating society.

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