

California prisoners strike to end the torture of long-term solitary confinement

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by Andrea Bauer



On July 8, the day the hunger strike began, protesters demonstrated outside a number of California state prisons, including Pelican Bay State Prison in Crescent City (above). Photo: Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity.

On July 8, prisoners across California began a hunger strike and work stoppage, the third strike in as many years. This one, the largest by far, involved 30,000 inmates in two thirds of the state's 33 prisons at its peak. It is marked by determined truces among prisoners of all races. Prisoners outside the state also refused to work on the first day of the strike in solidarity.

The number of people participating has fallen as of this writing to less than a thousand, according to state officials, but the strike is being kept alive by a strong core group at Pelican Bay State Prison, near the Oregon border, and brave, determined inmates in nine other prisons around the state.

The prisoners' main demand is an end to long-term solitary confinement. California holds about 12,000 people in solitary, including many who have been in the windowless boxes of a Security Housing Unit (SHU) for decades. At Pelican Bay, half of the prisoners are in the SHU, most commonly sent there because of alleged ties to prison gangs. They are locked in their cells for at least 22 hours a day. More than 500 people have been held there for over a decade, and the average time a prisoner in the SHU spends there is 7.5 years.

The United Nations considers anything more than 15 days spent in solitary confinement to be a form of torture.

Four other strike demands are to stop punishing groups in prison for the actions of individuals; stop rewarding those who provide information on others; improve nutrition; and institute constructive programs for those in solitary confinement.

The only way to get out of the SHU is to “debrief,” although state officials claim this has changed recently. Debriefing means snitching on other prisoners, usually by identifying them as gang members, whether this is true or not. Sick prisoners are also routinely told that if they want better (meaning adequate) medical care for their conditions or illnesses, or improved pain management, the way to get this is by debriefing.

Strike leaders also say that they are taking action “not only to improve our own conditions but also as an act of solidarity with all prisoners and oppressed people around the world.” In turn, they have gotten support from prisoners and former prisoners from Guantánamo Bay to Palestine and Israel.

The strikers need all the support the world can offer. Predictably, prison officials are retaliating against them: separating them and shuffling them from unit to unit or prison to prison; lowering the temperatures in their cells; confiscating confidential legal documents; banning their legal advocates from the California system; and more.

Rallies to support the prisoners have been held in Los Angeles, Seattle, and elsewhere. The Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition is calling for more demonstrations, signatures on a petition to Calif. Governor Jerry Brown, and other actions. To get involved or learn more, visit the [Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity website](#). As hunger strikers approach their fourth week, the need is urgent.

What follows are statements by some of the strikers and their supporters.

Coercion and wickedness

Inmate Jeffrey Franklin, a plaintiff in the Center for Constitutional Rights lawsuit challenging long-term solitary confinement:

“Being in the SHU is designed to break you, to make you submit, but it is not clear to what. The only ways to get out alive is to inform on other prisoners — even if you have no information to provide, even if you risk violence by doing so, even if doing so puts your family in danger. Prison officials will also withhold adequate medical or mental health care unless you debrief. This is coercion and wickedness, pure and simple.”

To prisoners everywhere: you may be next in line

Greg Curry, 213-159, Ohio State Penitentiary, 878 Coitsville-Hubbard Rd, Youngstown OH 44505:

“Why should a prisoner in Ohio or Minnesota or New Mexico support California prisoners as they move into a crucial stage of struggle for their just due?

“My humble opinion is: How could any prisoner think that these apartheid-style policies being used in California won’t come knocking in Florida, West Virginia, Illinois or any prison system at any given time? Remember California is said to be a liberal state, in terms of political policy. How many conservative

governors are envious of such harsh prison policies right now?!

"I urge all of you in every prison and your able-bodied supporters to support this July 8 hunger strike in some form, but don't wait 'til this kind of policy pays you a visit."

Retaliation by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)

Anne Weills, a civil rights lawyer and attorney for several strikers, on the removal of 14 Pelican Bay strikers from their cells and transfer to more punitive isolation:

"This is a clear attack against a nonviolent protest. It is pathetic that in response to prisoners' calls for basic human and civil rights, the CDCR responds by violating those rights."

Weills noted that all 14 prisoners had signed onto the Agreement to End Hostilities Among Racial Groups — a document issued from the Pelican Bay SHU last summer urging prisoners to resolve conflicts peacefully among themselves and to work to end violence in the prison system. The CDCR has refused to distribute the agreement among prisoners.

After a visit to Pelican Bay, Weills reported:

"They are upping the ante in terms of cold. It's clearly a tactic to make everything uncomfortable and in essence retaliate for the hunger strike. They are freezing, these men. I could see them shivering in front of me. I had two sweaters on and I was freezing."

Action on the legal front

The Center for Constitutional Rights:

"We wholeheartedly support the prisoners' peaceful protest against their long-term isolation in physically and psychologically devastating conditions. As our lawsuit notes, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Torture has found that more than 15 days of solitary confinement violates human rights standards, yet hundreds of prisoners have been trapped in the Pelican Bay SHU for decades, denied physical contact and social interaction, with effectively no way out. This is undeniably cruel and unusual punishment. As we continue to litigate these issues in court, we applaud the empowering protest undertaken by the prisoners and urge the California Department of Corrections to act swiftly to meet the prisoners' demands and bring an end to this torture."

Architects for justice

Raphael Sperry, who heads Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, on visiting Pelican Bay:

"What struck me is that the whole building was designed to eliminate social contact. Studies show that that undermines people's psyches. We have to say we're never designing these buildings again."

The San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects has endorsed a call for architects to refuse to design execution chambers and solitary confinement cells, and the New York chapter is considering doing so.

Solidarity from Palestine

Khader Adnan, former Palestinian political prisoner in Israel who waged a 66-day hunger strike:

“The policy of isolation exposes the ugly face of these false democracies that are guilty of occupation, tyranny and social repression.

“Hunger strikes are a courageous step and a real tool for all those who are deprived of their rights to lift the existing oppression, and I hope that these prisoners will gain their rights and their demands.”

In their own words

A July 23 statement by Pelican Bay SHU representatives Todd Ashker, Arturo Castellanos, Sitawa Nantambu Jamaa (Dewberry), and Antonio Guillen:

“Greetings of solidarity and respect to all of our supporters, all people of conscience around the world, and all similarly situated prisoners. You should know that once again our peaceful protest is making history, bringing international attention to our collective efforts to bring an end, once and for all, to the inhumane conditions and torture of indefinite solitary confinement.

“We are being tortured each day by state officials (Governor Brown, his appointee CDCR Secretary Beard, and all his underlings). Increased retaliation has been perpetuated upon defenseless and starving prisoners who only seek what any human being strives for — humane treatment, dignity, equality, and justice for our families, loved ones, and ourselves. These are the fundamental rights of all people, including those incarcerated by the state. We are doing all we can, together with our outside supporters, to bring about a positive change. Gov. Brown is not above the will of the people of California, and if he refuses to recognize the legitimacy of our human and civil rights struggle against the practices of this prison system, then it is the responsibility of the federal government and President Obama to use their powers to stop the harm being done to thousands of prisoners being held in solitary confinement.

“CDCR officials are attempting to undermine the voluntary actions of prisoners who truly want better treatment and living conditions by wrongfully accusing us of forcing tens of thousands of prisoners across California, along with our supporters in the free world, to participate in our protest. Prisoners across the state are participating because of the inhumane conditions they are being subjected to. As HUMAN BEINGS prisoners are collectively resisting such treatment, and they are doing so peacefully. The attempted repression of our protest has not broken our spirits. In fact it has only helped to strengthen each of us — individually and collectively. Despite CDCR’s retaliations and propaganda, we remain steadfast in our commitment. We will see our peaceful hunger strike through to victory, even if this requires us to endure the torture of force-feeding. We believe at this point in our struggle we are prepared to do what is necessary in order for Gov. Brown and the CDCR to realize how serious we are, and how far and long we are willing to go to have our reasonable demands implemented.

"We are hopeful that all those brave men and women across the state who are participating in this strike — all who are able health-wise — will be encouraged to issue public statements of their own, via media outlets across the country, letting the world know why they have taken part in this historic, collective struggle.

"In closing, we want to inform the world that this hunger strike is far from over. We are in it for the long haul. Thus, we strongly urge Gov. Brown to return from his 'get-away' vacation overseas and deal urgently with this crisis before more prisoners suffer serious health damage or death. If any deaths do occur, the responsibility for them will fall squarely on Brown and the CDCR in their callousness and inaction.

"We believe that we will prevail."

Please [sign the petition](#) to end indefinite solitary confinement.

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