

Mass Hunger Strike by Californian Prisoners Protesting Torture: Dangers of Starvation-related Deaths

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"We are certain that we will prevail . . . the only questions being: How many will die starvation-related deaths before state officials sign the agreement? The world is watching!"
Statement by California Hunger Strikers

On Monday 8 July over 30,000 prisoners in 24 of California's jails started an indefinite hunger strike and work stoppage. This historic struggle is the third hunger strike by prisoners in three years. The prisoners are protesting against indefinite solitary confinement in Security Housing Units (SHU's). An additional 2,300 prisoners refused to work or attend classes.

Donna Willmott of the Prison Hunger Strikers Solidarity Committee has said that the current hunger strike is a continuation of previous non-violent struggles for justice. She has noted how, "In 2011, over 12,000 prisoners and their family and community members participated in state wide hunger strikes protesting the inhumane conditions in the SHU. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation promised meaningful reform. Prisoners have undertaken another hunger strike that began July 8th because of CDCR's failure to fulfil that promise."

On 20 June prisoners issued a statement calling for the hunger strike and work stoppage starting on July 8. In their statement they said that:

"our non-violent peaceful protest of our subjection to decades of indefinite state-sanctioned torture, via long term solitary confinement will resume on July 8, 2013, consisting of a hunger strike/work stoppage of indefinite duration until CDCR signs a legally binding agreement meeting our demands, the heart of which mandates an end to long-term solitary confinement (as well as additional major reforms)."

Condemnation of the widespread use of solitary confinement has come from a variety of organisations including the California Catholic Bishops. In a [recent statement](#) Bishop Richard Garcia called upon Governor Brown and Dr. Jeffrey Beard, California Secretary of Correction and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to end the overuse of solitary confinement and the various abuses committed against prisoners in the Secure Housing Units.

These abuses include denial of medical and mental health care treatment, being fed cold under portioned meals, being forced to wash in freezing cold water which has led many

prisoners to develop upper respiratory tract infections, denial of access to cold weather clothing and random brutality by prison guards.

Bishop Richard Garcia at the recent conference of California Catholic Bishops [stated that](#):

“We stand opposed to this treatment because it is not restorative. Placing humans in isolation in a Secure Housing Unit (SHU) has no restorative or rehabilitative purpose. International human rights standards consider more than 15 days in isolation to be torture. The world is watching California and the United States. No one affected by crime is helped when a human being is subjected to this inhumane form of punishment. It is time for change now.”

The hunger strikes have been organised across prison manufactured geographical and racial lines. The prisoners have [5 core demands](#):

1. Ending Group Punishment and Administrative Abuse – This includes prison administrations’ policy of “safety and concern” to justify indefinite solitary confinement in Security Housing Units. Prisoners can be accused of being gang members on the flimsiest of pretexts and then put away in solitary. Having books by Malcolm X or Black Panther George Jackson or possession of drawings of Aztec culture can lead to men being put into a Secure Housing Unit for years.
2. Abolish the Debriefing Policy, and Modify Active/Inactive Gang Status Criteria – Perceived gang membership is one of the leading reasons for placement in solitary confinement. The practice of “debriefing,” or offering up information about fellow prisoners particularly regarding gang status, is often demanded in return for better food or release from the SHU. Debriefing puts the safety of prisoners and their families at risk, because they are then viewed as “snitches.”
3. Comply with the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons 2006 Recommendations Regarding an End to Long-Term Solitary Confinement.
4. Provide Adequate and Nutritious Food – cease the practice of denying adequate food, and provide a wholesome nutritional meals including special diet meals.
5. Expand and Provide Constructive Programming and Privileges for Indefinite SHU Status Inmates – Examples include: Expand visiting regarding amount of time and adding one day per week, allow a weekly phone call.

In [press statements](#) the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation acknowledges the mass nature of the hunger strike. It dismisses the hunger strikes as the work of prison gangs and refuses to acknowledge the demands of the hunger strikers. In a punitive tone that bodes ill for the future the CDCR warned that those prisoners taking part in the hunger strike or refusing to work will be subjected to disciplinary action under state law. The CDCR also warns the leaders of the hunger strike, many of whom are in solitary confinement already, that they may be removed from general prison population and placed in an Administrative Segregation Unit.

These warnings appear to have had little effect with the mass hunger strikes spreading from California to prisons in Washington state.

The hunger strikers have won a lot of public support and a solidarity campaign has organised The Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition (PHSS) which is a state wide coalition of family members, legal workers, community organisations and members of the public. The PHSS was formed at the request of the prisoners to help raise public awareness about the hunger strike and coordinate a campaign to win the prisoner's five demands.

The Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition is calling upon Governor Brown and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to enter into "fair and accountable" negotiations with the hunger strikers immediately. It also demands that the civil and human rights of the prisoners be respected and that no retaliation be taken against those who have participated in the mass hunger strike.

On Saturday 13 July there was a large demonstration of support for the prisoners at Corcoran State Prison which isolates 2,000 prisoners in Secure Housing Units. This is just the latest protest of the ongoing solidarity campaign designed to put pressure upon Governor Brown and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to meet with prisoners representatives to negotiate an end to the mass hunger strike.

On 10 July prisoner representatives released a statement calling for [solidarity action](#) from the public:

" We encourage everyone to take action to support the strike wherever they live. Sign the petition demanding California Governor stop the torture; plan rolling solidarity fasts if you are able; use every means to spread the word; and participate in non-violent direct action to put pressure on decision-makers.

If it was not for your support, we would have died in 2011. Thank you everyone. We are confident we will prevail."

To learn more about the strike, visit the website of the prisoners solidarity campaign: www.prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com

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