

Prisoners at Pelican Bay End Hunger Strike... The Struggle Against the Inhumanity of Solitary Confinement Continues

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On Thursday, July 21, prisoners in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) were about to enter the fourth week of their hunger strike, demanding an end to the inhumane conditions of solitary confinement. Hundreds of prisoners in other prisons had joined them in solidarity, refusing food. That morning, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) issued a press release saying the strike was over. And later that night, Marilyn McMahon from California Prison Focus reported that she and Carol Strickman, an attorney working with the mediation team representing the hunger strikers, had spoken with four of the hunger strike leaders who were eating again. McMahon said the prisoners had “extended their deeply heartfelt thanks to all their supporters outside” and “they emphasized that that support was responsible for their wins and their safety from retaliation. Above all, they hammered home the message: This is just the beginning!”

The heroic struggle of prisoners from the most brutal hellholes of the U.S. prison system is an extremely significant and extraordinary development. These prisoners have set a courageous example and inspired people all over the world.

Prison Hunger Strike Solidarity (PHSS), a coalition based in the Bay Area committed to amplifying the voices of and supporting the hunger strikers, listed some of the gains of the hunger strike:

“While the CDCR vigorously dehumanizes prisoners, and refused to negotiate, saying (‘we don’t negotiate with prisoners’), they were effectively forced into offering an agreement to make changes; this historic strike has demanded **everyone** who is against torture in any way to recognize prisoners as human beings, to act on their beliefs that no one should ever be tortured; ...widened and intensified international scrutiny into prison conditions and policies in California, and around the United States, as well as solidarity in intervening in CDCR ‘business as usual’; ...(re)inspired prisoners to work together in struggling for their humanity to be recognized; ...proven to family members, former prisoners, advocates, lawyers, faith-based and religious groups, medical professionals, and community members and organizations that we can and need to continue to work together better in the struggle to change the conditions we live in, and to transform the devastation and disappearance prisons cause in our communities; ...re-invigorated rigorous and collective prisoner-led resistance in the U.S. [“It’s Not Over!” posted July 22, 2011 at <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/>]

Danger of Retribution

The press release from the CDCR reflected what has been the attitude of prison officials toward this hunger strike from the very beginning—that prisoners in the SHU are the “worst of the worst” and deserve what they get. The statement repeated the lie the CDCR has used to try to invalidate the prisoners’ demands: “This strike was ordered by prison gang leaders, individuals responsible for terrible crimes against Californians...”

The CDCR press release also implied there is going to be *retribution*—that they are going to *punish* the prisoners for daring to demand they be treated like *human beings*. It said: “We will now seek to stabilize operations for all inmates and continue our work to improve the safety and security of our prison system statewide.” Many prisoners have talked about how, on a daily basis, prison officials and guards exact retribution for all kinds of things they consider “uncooperative behavior.” For example, there are the “cell extractions,” where gangs of guards in full riot gear violently force a prisoner out of his cell, hog-tie and beat him—for something as minor as not returning a food tray or yelling at a guard. Already there has been a report from family members that Pelican Bay is on lockdown and visits are being denied. This underscores the importance of people on the outside monitoring the situation and making sure there is no retribution for the hunger strike.

This hunger strike has shone a light on the inhumane crimes being carried out by prison officials. The CDCR—and the system these prisons are a part of—do not like this, do not want this to continue, and need to crush the solidarity and organization the prisoners accomplished around their demands. This is the context for prison officials now saying they are going to “stabilize operations” and “improve the security and safety of our prison system statewide.”

And think about this: Many prisoners who end up in long-term solitary confinement were convicted of nonviolent crimes like drug possession and then ended up in the SHU simply because they were “validated” as a gang member. This could be based simply on a guard’s say-so or another prisoner being “debriefed”—that is, “validating” another prisoner in order to get out of the SHU himself. In fact, an end to “debriefing” has been one of the prisoners’ key demands.

Because prison officials have declared that this hunger strike was organized by gangs, they could now “validate” those who participated in the strike for even more punishment. And on this basis, hunger strikers who were not in the SHU could now be validated for participating in the strike—and put in the SHU.

Support Must Be Amplified

The CDCR press release says the prisoners stopped the strike after “they better understood CDCR’s plans, developed since January, to review and change some policies regarding SHU housing and gang management. These changes, to date, include providing cold-weather caps, wall calendars and some educational opportunities for SHU inmates.”

Prison officials are not speaking to the overall inhumane conditions of long-term solitary confinement in the SHU. This press release does not say anything about reviewing, let alone changing, conditions where prisoners are kept in windowless cells with no human contact for 23 hours a day. It does not say anything about the fact that prisoners in the SHU are subjected to conditions that experts have said cause serious psychological disorders.

A statement posted at the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity website said: “One thing is

absolutely clear: the five core demands have not been met. Long-term solitary confinement is still being used as torture. **Supporters everywhere must amplify the prisoners voices even more fiercely than before.** The goal of supporting the hunger strike was not to make sure prisoners continue to starve, rather to support the prisoners in winning their demands to change conditions of imprisonment. This struggle is not over.”

This IS Just the Beginning—The Struggle Must Continue

“We all realize that it took over 20 yrs of state sponsored torture and discrimination for us (prisoners) to come together and challenge this system under one Banner; that of liberty and justice, and that if we don’t hold our ground and win this fight, not only will that keep the chains on us, but more importantly, it will allow future generations to remain forever enslaved to this injustice as well. So for this purpose we remain committed to see this through until the bitter end.”

From a hunger striker at Pelican Bay Prison, writing to the Prisoners Revolutionary Literature Fund

The struggle does continue. The hunger strike shined a light on an absolutely intolerable, inhumane situation. It has built awareness and support among many different kinds of people. In cities around the country, people held press conferences and rallies in support of the hunger strike. And many statements of support were written, from legal, religious, and community organizations, family members, actors, prominent intellectuals, and others. Many people took a clear stand that NO human being, no matter what they have done, should be tortured, should be subjected to this kind of long-term solitary confinement.

The day after the strike ended at Pelican Bay, the *L.A. Times* reported that “California corrections officials acknowledged more than 500 inmates continue to refuse meals at three other state prisons.” So it is important to find out what is happening with other prisoners who have been on the hunger strike. And there is a real need to find out the medical condition of *all* the prisoners who participated in the strike.

Especially as it became clear that some of the hunger strikers were in a medical crisis, many people on the outside saw this was a life-and-death situation and recognized the urgency of supporting the prisoners’ demands. This has been extremely important—and must be built off and developed even further into a mass, determined movement to put an END to these prison torture chambers.

The fact is: tens of thousands of prisoners are being held in the kind of barbarous conditions that the prisoners at Pelican Bay have so courageously rebelled against. These prisoners are dying a slow, horrible death. The fact is: a life-and-death situation exists for these prisoners every day. And it is in the *interests* of those who oppose injustice and oppression to wage a determined fight to put an end to this. Whatever the outcome of any particular battle in this struggle to put an end to the torture going on in U.S. prisons, the challenge from the prisoners to people on the outside remains. We cannot stand to the side, it is up to us not only to continue but to build this struggle even further. An important factor in whether or not prison officials are forced to give *any* concessions to the prisoners will be the level of outside support for the prisoners, including the degree to which this grows and spreads awareness of this struggle more broadly in society, among all kinds of people.

The hunger strikers—by asserting their humanity, by demanding that they be treated like

human beings—have issued a challenge to people on the outside, to assert their own humanity by continuing the fight against the crimes against humanity being carried out in prisons throughout the USA. The support that has been built around this hunger strike is a good beginning. But it is only a beginning—many, many more people need to join this fight.

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