

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/01/05/ohio-prisoners-go-on-hunger-strike-for-transfer-from-solitary-to-death-row/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 5, 2011

Four prisoners have at the supermax Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown have gone on a hunger strike to protest their solitary confinement. Their only demand: that they be moved to the state's Death Row.

The prisoners Bomani Shakur, Siddique Abdullah Hasan, Jason Robb and Namir Abdul Mateen were sentenced to death for their involvement in the 1993 prison uprising in Lucasville, Ohio, in which a guard and several inmates were killed. They have now been in 23-hour-a-day solitary for more than 17 years. Based on the nature of their crime, they are being denied the privileges given others on Death Row in Ohio, and condemned to permanent isolation.

[Democracy Now](#) today featured an excerpt from an interview with historian, lawyer, and activist [Staughton Lynd](#), author of the 2004 book [Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising](#). Lynd told Amy Goodman:

They are held in more restrictive confinement than the more than 100 other death sentence prisoners in the same prison. Now, why is this? It's precisely because the system thinks of them as leaders. So, it will let them watch television. They even let Bomani Shakur use a typewriter. But what they don't let any of the four men do is to be in the same space as another human being other than a guard at the same time. And this means that while other death sentence prisoners can wander about the pod, can have collective meals outside their cells, and especially can have semi-contact visits with their friends and families, the four are always obliged to encounter the world either through a solid cell door or, when they go out on a visit, through a solid pane of glass. So that, again, Bomani has a niece and nephew aged eight and three that he loves and would wish to touch. If he were on death row, he could do that. But he's been told by the prison authorities he will never be on death row, because they're going to keep him in social isolation until they kill him.

A longer interview with Lynd, conducted by Angola 3 News, [appears here](#), along with background on the 1993 uprising.



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

To paraphrase you Five prisoners were sentenced to death for their involvement in the 1993 prison uprising in Lucasville, Ohio, in which a guard and several inmates were killed. They have now been in 23-hour-a-day solitary for more than 17 years. Based on the nature of their crime, they are being denied the privileges given others on Death Row in Ohio, and condemned to permanent isolation.

Their story was written down by historian, lawyer, and activist, Staughton Lynd in 2004 in a book titled Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising.

In the book Lynd describes the uprising from the inside how the prisoners worked together, black and white, even Muslims and members of the Aryan Brotherhood, for the improvement of conditions.

The activist publication Angola 3 states they reached beyond their prison tribes to reach commonality.

The importance of the story is that the five men sentenced to death are three blacks and two whites. Two of the three blacks are Muslims. At the time of the rebellion the two whites were members of the Aryan Brotherhood

These five men have acted in solidarity during their almost eighteen years of solitary confinement. They have refused to snitch on each other

the State made it clear early on that they wanted to put the alleged leaders of the disturbance to death

In reading this story and the one about the recent Georgia Prison work stoppage I recalled Howard Zinn's words in *The Peoples History of the United States*.

We should all heed the lessons of our shared history that he presents.

Page 37: Only one fear was greater than the fear of black rebellion in the new American colonies. That was the fear that discontented whites would join black slaves to overthrow the existing order. In the early years of slavery while white indentured servants were often treated as badly as black slaves, there was a possibility of cooperation.

Then there was Bacon's Rebellion, an uprising in 1776 in the Virginia Colony in North America, led by 29-year-old planter Nathaniel Bacon.

Page 55: What made Bacon's Rebellion especially fearsome for the rulers of Virginia was that black slaves and white servants joined forces.

Page 176: The instances where poor whites helped slaves were not frequent, but sufficient to show the need for setting one group against the other. This helps explain the stern police measures against whites who fraternized with blacks.

In the last months of his life Malcolm X began to reconsider his support of Black Nationalism after meeting northern African revolutionaries who, to all appearances, were white.

After his Hajj, Malcolm X articulated a view of white people and racism that represented a deep change from the philosophy he had supported as a minister of the Nation of Islam.

In a famous letter from Mecca, he wrote that his experiences with white people during his pilgrimage convinced him to rearrange his thinking about race and toss aside some of his previous conclusions.

In a 1965 conversation with Gordon Parks, two days before his assassination, Malcolm said:

Brother, remember the time that white college girl came into the restaurant the one who wanted to help the Black Muslims and the whites get together and I told her there wasn't a ghost of a chance and she went away crying?

Well, I've lived to regret that incident. In many parts of the African continent I saw white students helping black people. Something like this kills a lot of argument.

Back to Howard Zinn's words:

Page 461-462: Martin Luther King himself became more and more concerned about problems untouched by civil rights laws problems coming out of poverty. He connected war and poverty: . King now became a chief target of the FBI As a Senate report on the FBI said in 1976, the FBI tried to destroy Dr. Martin Luther King.

King was turning his attention to troublesome questions He planned a Poor Peoples Encampment in Washington went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike of garbage workers in that city. There, standing on a balcony outside his hotel room, he was shot to death by an unseen marksman.

Page 463-464: Between 1956 and 1971 the FBI concluded a massive Counterintelligence Program (known as COINTELPRO) that took 295 actions against black groups.

Was there fear that blacks would turn their attention from the controllable field of voting to the more dangerous area of wealth and poverty of class conflict?

The new emphasis was more dangerous than civil rights, because it created the possibility of blacks and whites uniting on the issue of class exploitation.

It is also noteworthy that Malcolm X had spoken at the Socialist Workers Partys public forum and interviewed by the Young Socialist magazine not long before his own assassination.

George L. Jackson the founder of the Prison Movement in the 1960s was also a self proclaimed black communist revolutionary and member of the Black Panther Party. In his book titled Blood in My Eye which was completed barely a week before he was shot dead in San Quentin Prison by guards in a reported escape attempt on August 21, 1971.

Here is a quote from the preface of Blood in My Eye xii written by Gregory Armstrong on October 15, 1971.

What made him (Jackson) particularly dangerous to the prison authorities was his enormous talent as an organizer.

Later in the preface Jackson is credited as saying We have got to be together. We have got to be in a position to tell the pig that if he doesnt serve the food when its warm and pass out the scouring powder on time, everybody on the tier is going to throw something at him, then things will change and life will be easier. You dont get that kind of unity when youre fighting with each other. Im always telling the brothers that some of those whites are willing to work with us against the pigs. All they got to do is stop talking honky. When the races start fighting, all you have is one maniac group against another. That is what the pigs want.

Now we have this latest letter from an inmate currently on San Quentins death row:

12/14/2010

In Solidarity

By Kevin Cooper

On Thursday, December 9, 2010, the inmates in the state of Georgia sat down in unity and peace in order to stand up for their human rights.

African American, White, and Latino inmates put aside their differences, if they had any, and came together as a People fighting for their humanity in a system that dehumanizes all of them.

For this they have my utmost respect and appreciation and support. I am in true solidarity with them all!

Using MLKs method of non-violent protest inmates in Georgia had held a work stoppage. Their peaceful methods did not give the prison authorities the excuse to use deadly force against them like they had used against Jackson.

But I fear isolation is in the future of those who had lead this strike.

Inmates sometimes say that there are only three ways out of a supermax prison: parole, snitch, or die. You can read about the author of a research paper with this same title here:

http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2010/12/07_supermax.shtml

here are some excerpts from this interview with the author Reiter:

We think of supermax as taking the worst of the worst, says Reiter noting that California inmates are sent to the SHU if theyre determined to be a gang leader or if they commit a serious infraction of prison rules, such as attacking a guard, while inside. Yet most supermax prisoners get out eventually.

California releases 50 to 100 prisoners a month to parole from supermax often without any transitional programming inside to re-acclimate them to human interaction, or prepare them to make a living on the outside.

You dont have to have a law degree or a human-rights orientation, as Reiter does, to wonder whether such a system is the best way to protect the public, especially given longstanding concerns about the psychological effects of solitary confinement.

.what surprised Reiter most, she says, is how powerful and powerfully sad these former prisoners stories were. Each had different, but poignant, anecdotes about the way they experienced the deprivation conditions, she recalls. People spoke of having no clocks, daylight, or seasons to mark the passage of time; growing pale from lack of sunlight; and being amazed at the sight of a single bird, insect, or even the moon, after months or years of virtually no exposure to the natural world.

lack of contact with other human beings is its own psychological endurance test. A man who spent 10 years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay told Reiter about what happened once when his cell and his neighbors opened just slightly at the same time: a prisoner from a rival gang reached through and the two tough guys held hands. In the moment, being enemies didnt really matter, she says. They were just happy for the human touch.

I am not a socialist or revolutionary but I do have compassion for the poor and a growing disdain for the tactics that have historically divided us.

I believe as MLK, Malcolm X, and George L. Jackson also all came to believe that to win better conditions for all our citizens in the

future we need to begin with Solidarity.

We could begin by promoting SOLIDAITY IN SOLITARY.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News