

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/07/13/members-of-congress-call-for-federal-investigation-of-louisianas-use-of-solitary-confinement-treatment-of-the-angola-3/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | July 13, 2013

***Update, July 15:** Over the weekend, Louisianas Hunt prison reduced Herman Wallaces classification from maximum to medium, according to a source in his defense team. That means the terminally ill Wallace will stay in the prison hospital in a 10-bunk dorm, with access to a day room, and won't have to wear leg irons. His phone privileges are to return next week. There is no mention of any compassionate release.*

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The egregious and extensive use of solitary confinement and other troubling detention practices at Angola and other Louisiana State prisons appear to violate the U.S. Constitution and federal law, say four leading Democratic members of the House of Representatives.

The four Congressmen are urging the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate the Louisiana Departments of Corrections for its abysmal history of protecting the rights of its prisoners, of which the tragic story of the Angola 3 is a case in point.

The accusations [came in a letter](#) dated July 12, addressed to the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department and signed by four Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee: ranking member John Conyers of Michigan, Cedric Richmond of Louisiana, Jerrold Nadler of New York, and Bobby Scott of Virginia, all of whom have some history as criminal justice reformers.

The bulk of the letter deals with Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, the two members of the Angola 3 who remain in solitary after 41 years. It follows on the news that Wallace has terminal liver cancer, and on appeals from [Amnesty International](#), among others, for his immediate release on humanitarian grounds. The letter states:

Since their convictions (which are currently under review in federal court), Woodfox and Wallace have endured over four decades of isolation. This is an unprecedented period of time by any standard, and quite possibly the longest any person has spent in solitary confinement worldwide. Within the last five years, Woodfox and Wallace have been transferred from Angola to other facilities in the Louisiana prison system, including the David Wade Correctional Center (Wade) and the Evalyn Hunt Correctional Center (Hunt), where we understand the very same complained-of constitutional and statutory violations have been perpetuated. We understand that upon their transfers, brand new Closed Cell Restricted (CCR) tiers were created at these facilities, and additional inmates are now also confined on these tiers. We have reason to believe that, as at Angola, many of the inmates housed in the CCR tiers of Hunt and Wade suffer from mental health and other serious illnesses. Woodfox and Wallace continue to be held apart from the general prison population, to the detriment of their mental and physical health.

Indeed, after years of what we have been informed was sub-standard medical care, Herman Wallace was diagnosed just weeks ago with liver cancer. We have heard that he lost over 50 pounds within 6 months. Despite that dramatic weight loss, and at 72 years old, the prison did nothing to treat or diagnose him until he was sent to an emergency room on June 14. Given the late stage of his diagnosis, his treatment options are now limited. He is frail and ill, but is still being treated as if he is a threat to security, and we hear that he remains under lockdown conditions. This is unconscionable.

We also have reason to believe that at the Wade facility, 68-year-old Woodfox, and all CCR inmates there, are being subjected to daily strip searches whenever they enter or exit their cells, even when there is no basis or reasonable suspicion that they might be in possession of contraband. We have been told that even when Woodfox is removed from his cell to go to the exercise yard, where he is being kept under surveillance of guards and apart from any other inmates or prison visitors, he is strip searched when he leaves his cell and upon return.

The letter, which its authors say is based upon six years of conversations about conditions at the prison with officials, inmates and stakeholders, goes on to catalog violations faced not only by the Angola 3, but also by inmates who have received less attention from the press.

We have reason to believe, the letter states, that Louisiana DOC employees have colluded with persons from the Office of the Louisiana Attorney General to fabricate violations of prison rules to unjustifiably punish inmates. In addition, it states, we have reason to believe that the Louisiana DOC continues to knowingly engage in behavior that violates the due process rights of inmates held in solitary confinement by orchestrat[ing] sham 90-day reviews that take no consideration of a prisoners conduct while he was in solitary or the prisoners state of mind, and do not attempt to determine, by any defined standard, whether the prisoner should be released to a less restrictive cellblock or dormitory. We have been informed that there may be more than 100 inmates who have been subjected to these fictitious reviews.

The letter points out that lawyers, politicians, and activists have urged the Louisiana Department of Corrections, and most especially the Angola and Hunt warden Burl Cain, to relax his hold on Wallace and Woodfox. But Cain has insisted in court papers that the two are dangerous subversives, guilty of Black Pantherism and a threat to prison order, while Louisiana Attorney General Buddy Caldwell has stated that should these two elderly men be allowed out of prison, pillage and mayhem would ensue.

The New Orleans Times-Picayune sought comment on the letter from both Caldwell and the Louisiana Department of Corrections, and reported:

In response, Corrections Communications Director Pam LaBorde said the department practices constitutionally sound policies and procedures in all areas including medical care and security and provides adequate care to any inmate in need of it.

The attorney generals office was less measured in their response, calling the letter a diatribe while adding they could not comment on the issue because of pending litigation with Wallace and Woodfox.

However, we feel compelled to point out that Congressman Richmond soft pedaled a very important fact concerning these two individuals, the statement added. Both of them were unanimously convicted for the murder of a young prison guard at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola after having already been convicted of other violent felonies.

The convictions of both Wallace and Woodfox and under appeal, and a lawsuit challenging their four decades of isolation has been pending for years. This Congressional entreaty to the Justice Department comes late in the game. But with little movement in the courts, the Democrats clearly felt they should do something, make some gesture at the very least, before it is too late for Herman Wallace.

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.

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by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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