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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/10/01/prisons-use-solitary-confinement-to-silence-strikers-nationwide-but-their-voices-have-been-heard/>

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by [Valerie Kiebola and Jean Casella](#) | October 1, 2018

In commemoration of the Attica Uprising 47 years earlier, incarcerated organizers chose September 9 as the final day of the nearly three-week-long National Prison Strike that began on August 21. The strike eventually extended to federal prisons, state prisons, immigration detention centers, and local jails across at least fourteen states, with actions ranging from work stoppages to sit-ins, hunger strikes, and commissary boycotts. Both the strikers original demands and the harsh repression they faced serve as a grim reminder that in many ways, the U.S. criminal justice system has actually regressed in the intervening 47 years a period in which the prison population grew by nearly 700 percent.

Along with its nationwide reach, the strike was remarkable for the breadth of the [ten demands](#) released through [Jailhouse Lawyers Speak](#) (JLS), a group of incarcerated legal advocates which, along with the [Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee](#) (IWOC), was instrumental in organizing the strike. Far from concentrating on a narrow range of improvements to prison conditions, the organizers made clear that they are challenging the punishment paradigm that underlies the American criminal justice system, and seeking sweeping reforms to reverse the five-decade trend toward mass incarceration that began during the era of Attica.

The demands include not only improved conditions that recognize the humanity of imprisoned men and women, but also payment of the prevailing wage for prison labor (effectively an override of the 13th Amendment); sentencing and parole reform, including an end to life without parole; and measures to address the racism that saturates the system. Demands also include reversal of the 1996 Prison Litigation Reform Act, which sharply curtailed the ability of incarcerated people to fight for their rights in court; access to rehabilitation and education for everyone, including those convicted of violent offenses (and the funding to pay for it); and voting rights for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated citizens. The demands end, appropriately, with the statement: All voices count!

Incarcerated people who participated in the strike took great risks in their words and actions, seizing the chance to empower themselves in an environment designed to strip them of power, along with freedom and dignity. And not surprisingly, prison administrators and staff have been swift to employ their primary tool of control to repress incarcerated voices, retaliate against incarcerated organizers, and preemptively quell the strike: solitary confinement.

The nationwide strike, which began on the anniversary of the death of prison activist and Black Panther George Jackson, was planned in reaction to a deadly riot in April of this year at the maximum security Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina. While prison officials blamed the riot on gang disputes, Amani Sawari from JLS [attributed](#) the violence to really aggravated conditions at the prison, including an extended lockdown that subjected the entire prison population to virtual solitary confinement. They were placed on lockdown all day, she said. They weren't allowed to eat or use the bathroom. They were placed in units with rival gang members. And then their lockers were taken away, so they didn't have any safe place to put their personal belongings, which really aggravated and caused tensions among prisoners to the point where fights broke out. Seven incarcerated men, six of them African American, died in the riot, and at least 22 were injured. No corrections officers were injured, and one witness [told](#) the Associated Press that the COs never even attempted to render aid, nor quell the disturbance.

Incarcerated people at Lee Correctional continued to be held in conditions of solitary confinement following the riot, allegedly for safety reasons. One man held at Lee claimed that the officials were actually using solitary confinement as a method to prevent participation in the widely publicized nationwide strike. Fearing retaliation, the man [spoke](#) anonymously to *Kite Line*, saying, As an attempt to oppress our voices and quash our unity, we have been on 24-hour lockdown since what has transpired at Lee Correctional Institution back in April this year. He explained, That means zero movement whatsoever. Were being fed late in the night. Were only receiving one shower a week. Were being denied cell cleaning as well as clean drinking water, even when there are water advisories. Any inmate who attempts to participate in this strike is being placed in solitary confinement, which is lockupseg. As a result of what has taken place, you know, what has transpired at Lee, and the fact that we have been on 24-hour lockdown without any cell movement whatsoever, there have been a number of suicides and attempts.

South Carolina was not the only state to lock down a facility in the days leading up to the strike. A story in the *Santa Fe Reporter*

revealed that the New Mexico Department of Corrections had publicized in a Facebook post a statewide lockdown at 11 prisons starting on August 20. The story also featured an internal [memo](#) from New Mexico's Lea County Correctional Facility, announcing the lockdown schedule, beginning on August 20 and lasting until September 17, which explained that if an incarcerated person's behavior is acceptable, their privileges will be gradually reinstated each week. The memo suggested prison officials were tracking down individuals participating in a disruptive behavior. It stated, "Although some participants have been identified, all have yet to be identified. Those who are identified, the memo continues, will have their good time suspended and will remain in the restricted conditions, barred from visitation and phone calls, receiving only one sack meal and two hot meals, and allowed only a 10-minute shower three times a week."

Retaliation against individual organizers also began in anticipation of the strike. *The Appeal* [reported](#) that as early as June, a man held at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, Ronald Brooks, was punished for making a Facebook video using a contraband cell phone that urged others to take part in the upcoming strike. "We are anti-slavery and are organizing to transform our ghettos into communities and our jails and prisons into places of human redemption," Brooks said in the video. Brooks had helped organize a previous work stoppage at Angola, a former slave plantation where men earn as little as 4 cents an hour to work in the fields. While Brooks had previously been caught with illegal cell phones and punished with loss of privileges, this time the state transferred him 250 miles away to David Wade Correctional Center. To be moved totally from a facility [has] to do with the fact that they knew that Ronald was being a human rights advocate, his mother told *The Appeal*. What they wanted to do was to move him away because he was an organizer.

Once the strike began, a host of media outlets covered its development, and some reported on the conditions underlying the strikers' demands. Articles appeared in most of the nation's leading publications, including *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *Time*, as well as dozens of local, international, and progressive news outlets. As the strike gained media traction, the use of solitary as a means to silence organizers and stifle participation increasingly came to light.

Imam Siddique Abdullah Hasan, who is incarcerated at Ohio State Penitentiary (OSP), was placed on lockdown in late July after prison administrators intercepted strike-related mail and overheard Hasan speak to a group of strike supporters over the phone. According to an [article](#) in *Shadowproof*, the head of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Bureau of Classification wrote that prison officials obtained this information about Hasan while monitoring communications and social media postings related to planning a nationwide prison strike from August 21 to September 9, 2018. Hasan remains in the most restricted form of solitary confinement and has been prohibited from phone communication for a year. When another man incarcerated at OSP, Greg Curry, passed along news of the retaliation against Hasan to people on the outside, he was placed in solitary as well.

Kevin Rashid Johnson, currently held at Sussex I State Prison in Virginia, published an [article](#) in *The Guardian* describing the retaliation he has faced for his outspoken organizing behind bars in the past three decades, including physical abuse, interstate transfers, and solitary confinement most recently, on Virginia's death row, although he is not serving a death sentence. The Virginia Department of Corrections has set a hearing for Johnson for September 10, which he fears is preparatory to another out-of-state transfer, possibly into the federal system and into a site of extreme isolation, [according](#) to Johnson's website.

Ezzial Williams, an organizer with the IWOC held at Union Correctional Institution in Florida, was placed in solitary confinement in what the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) calls close management, which he attributed to his involvement in organizing the strike. In a letter to Solitary Watch, Williams said, "As the National Prisoner Strike leading up to September 9 continues to gain momentum, I find myself in super-solitary confinement humbly rooting for the progress being made. I mean, it's all over the news these days! You see, I am currently serving an 18-month punishment in solitary (close management) for allegedly attempting to incite a riot through an email speaking out about the inhumane treatment of inmates. Despite only suggesting non-violent sit-downs that never occurred, I was found guilty for saying something versus doing it."

Williams continued on to describe the conditions he faces in close management. "Not only has my custody gone from minimum to maximum but I went from a work camp to being housed right next to death row inmates, locked down for 23 hours a day for the next year and a half. I've been subjected to a cell with no running hot water and a broken light that brightly blinks off and on all night, disrupting my sleep greatly. Every time I step out of the cell to go to medical or take a shower (three times a week), a few feet away I have to strip down and expose each orifice for contraband. Cell searches to harass us under the guise of security is the norm and sometimes soon after, a surprise inspection is called which means if your cell is untidy (thanks to the search), you could go on strip for 72 hours (all property, linen, and clothes is removed except for your boxers) or be subjected to disciplinary action resulting in a longer stay in solitary."

An outside prison reform activist [told](#) WJCT public radio in Jacksonville that strike participants across Florida facilities have faced retaliation. She said, "They are sprayed with pepper spray, they're put in solitary in freezing conditions, in just underwear, handcuffed and slammed into walls." Karen Smith, a Florida IWOC organizer, [stated](#) to *The Guardian*, "Prison authorities have moved most of the local strike organizers into solitary confinement wings where they will be unable to communicate with others." IWOC [reported](#) to the *Daily Beast* that Florida had locked down at least five of their prisons by August 24, though the FDOC refuted this.

Hunger strikers at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC), an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility operated by the GEO Group in Tacoma, Washington, allegedly faced solitary confinement for their participation in the strike as well. An organizer with NWDC Resistance [told](#) *Think Progress*, "The numbers [of strike participants] started with about 200 people. We were cautious with the number of people we were counting. The people who were hunger striking were moved immediately into solitary confinement." NWDC Resistance reported that 20 more people at the facility faced solitary after joining the strike on August 30.

[According](#) to the IWOC, David Easley and James Ward, held at Toledo Correctional Institution in Ohio, were placed in solitary confinement following their initiation of a hunger strike as part of the nationwide strike. IWOC also reported that Jason Turmon, a Jailhouse Lawyers Speak organizer incarcerated at the McCormick Correctional Institution in South Carolina, was sent to the solitary confinement unit for his participation in the strike.

Solitary confinement has historically functioned as a means to prevent the collective action of people in prison. Acts of unity and solidarity among incarcerated people, even those that present no risk to peace or security, are considered threats to the absolute power wielded by correctional staff and the functioning of the prison system. Ezzial Williams echoed this in his letter when he said, "The odds

are stacked against us here and this whole thing is designed to break you down.

In an appearance on [Democracy Now!](#), Cole Dorsey, a formerly incarcerated organizer with the IWOC, commented on why he believes the strike threatened the larger social and economic order, and had to be quickly repressed. If these jobs that they're now giving to prisoners—meat packing and call center work—if they were given at a prevailing wage in those same communities that those prisoners came from prior, then they wouldn't be in the prisons now, he said. But the system has recognized that it's easier to control the population while they're inside prisons than it is if they're outside, because then they have the right to strike, they have federal protections, whereas inside it can just be called an insurrection. Automatically, the leaders are sent to solitary. Automatically, they're transferred. Automatically, privileges are denied—no more family, no more phone calls. So from a social justice and human rights aspect, it's really draconian.

Those who organized and participated in the National Prison Strike undoubtedly knew that they would face punishment, including the torture of prolonged solitary confinement. And most of them surely knew that none of their demands would be met as a result of the strike. Yet they were willing to take action and endure the consequences. Their strategically planned strike, with its broad demands and strong outreach to the media, at least ensured that millions of Americans would be reminded of the suffering and injustice that goes on behind bars, and the existence of a path to change. And the message the strikers sent to the outside world is clear: The next steps are ours to take.

Banner photo: Demonstration in San Francisco in solidarity with prison strike, from [itsgoingdown.org](#).

Valerie Kiebal was a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in The Root, Truthout, the Chicago Reporter, and Shadowproof. 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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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

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