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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | July 15, 2013

California prisoners have been on hunger strike for one full week, today, in protest of long-term solitary confinement. The hunger strike began on July 8th with participation of approximately 30,000 people in two-thirds of California's prisons, as well as several out-of-state facilities holding California prisoners. In the first days of the hunger strike, approximately 3,200 others also refused to attend work or education classes as a form of protest in support of the hunger strike. As of Sunday, there are an estimated 4,487 still on hunger strike.

On Thursday, July 11th, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) put out a [press release](#) summarizing information about the strike. Notably, unlike the strikes of 2011, CDCR declared the strikes to be a mass hunger strike disturbance. The press release indicated CDCR's intention of punishing participants in the hunger strike, saying that participants of the strike would be subjected to disciplinary procedures and that hunger strike leaders would be placed in Administrative Segregation Units (Ad-Seg). Ad-Seg placement was commonly used against strike leaders in 2011, who reported being placed in cells generally smaller than their SHU cells and were significantly barer. As hunger strike leader Todd Ashker wrote in [2011](#):

We were all isolated on a tier, in strip cells with nothing but a set of clothes and fish kit spoon, cup, bar of soap etc. with ice cold air blasting outta the vents! The warden personally told us, As soon as you eat, you can go back to your SHU (Security Housing Units) cells. My mattress was not even a mattress. It only had lumps of padding in places and was only 50 inches long on ice cold concrete. This was all intentional, by design. They know that when a person is subject to cold, the body requires more energy. When you're not eating, the ice will cause your body to feed on muscle and internal organs and the brain etc. much faster. Permanent damage can happen a lot faster.

Solitary Watch was able to confirm that identified strike leaders at California State Prison, Corcoran, had already been placed in Ad Seg by Friday. Further, Corcoran Public Information Officer Lt. Anthony Baer confirmed that canteen items had been removed from the cells of participants. Lt. Baer also explained why CDCR ordered prisons not to divulge information as to how many individuals were striking at their facilities, saying if word gets out that certain prisons are not participating or the number at a particular prison isn't high enough those inmates could be in extreme danger.

This position was also repeated by the Officer of the Receiver, which oversees health care services in CDCR facilities. A spokesperson there told Solitary Watch that she could not report how many hunger strikers were being medically monitored because: Inmates have told prison staff that they are feeling pressured and coerced to participate. We are concerned about the safety of inmates who are being pressured to do this. However, she did report that the hunger strike at High Desert State Prison, which began a week prior to the statewide strike, had ended by Friday, and that 10 participants had been medically monitored.

Information from Pelican Bay State Prison was more difficult to gather. PIO Lt. Christopher Acosta repeatedly responded to questions emailed by Solitary Watch with one line referrals to ask CDCR spokeswoman Terry Thornton any questions about Pelican Bay. A sister of a hunger striker at Pelican Bay told Solitary Watch that she had visited with her brother on Saturday. She reports that all canteen items had been taken from strike participants' cells, that strike leaders had been removed to Ad-Seg, and that individuals in the SHU are being threatened with three-month extensions to their SHU term for participation. The wife of another hunger striker also reported to Solitary Watch that strikers were being written up for rules violations.

One issue notably revealed by the CDCR press release is that CDCR has halted the case-by-case reviews of all 3,000 individuals in the SHU. The reviews began in early 2013 at all facilities holding gang validated CDCR inmates who were subject to an indeterminate SHU term. The purpose of the reviews was to determine whether or not individuals presently determined to be gang members or gang associates should be retained in the SHU, placed in the Step Down Program, or released to the general population due to lack of evidence of gang activity. As the press release states, 215 of the 382 individuals reviewed have been endorsed for release to general population. In other words, CDCR has put on hold a review process that has revealed that CDCR gang investigators have been placing individuals in the SHU with standards that failed to identify security threats by their own (now-revised) standards.

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Bay View has published letters from California State Prison-Sacramento and [Calipatria State Prison](#), from individuals confirming strike activity at their facilities. Calipatria's Ad-Seg holds many individuals who are currently awaiting transfer to a SHU, but have instead been held in ASUs due to all SHU cells being occupied. One letter from CSP-Sacramento, written as the strike began, [reads](#): There's only a chosen few of us Afrikan brotha'z left in the struggle on C-Facility with many tapping out from threats of losing materialistic privileges threats that all our property will be taken and we'll be placed in isolation and force fed if we continue striking.

One mother, who requested anonymity, told Solitary Watch that she visited her son at CCI-Tehachapi this past weekend. Her son, a hunger striker held in the SHU at CCI, told her that correctional officers (along with dogs) had seized all canteen items from the cells of strike participants. Sandbags have been placed at the cell doors of strikers in order to prevent fishing, or note-passing. My son says that the sandbags prevent the air from circulating in his cell, she says. She also reports significantly grimmer news. The nurse does check on them every two days as well, and that the nurse asked if he wanted to be resuscitated and he said yes. My son said that his neighbor, did not want to be resuscitated because he has a life sentence and he does not want to grow old in the SHU. My son is feeling the effect of the hunger strike and he said they are holding out to the end.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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

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This is more excellent reporting, Sal. The depravity of CDCR is sickening. On the one hand, they put out propaganda consisting of unsubstantiated allegations that unidentified prisoners of undetermined number are participating only because of unspecified threats from other prisoners; on the other hand they readily admit that they are maliciously tightening the screws by depriving prisoners of the meager amenities they have, creating a bottleneck in the review process, and ensuring that those who exercise their human right to protest will be subjected to further torture. CDCR is openly coercing prisoners to cease their protest by subjecting them to additional tortures and promises of more to come. It is more and more clear everyday who the real criminals are in this sordid empire.

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