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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2016/05/05/prison-labor-strike-in-alabama-we-will-no-longer-contribute-to-our-own-oppression/>

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by [Jack Denton](#) | May 5, 2016

Despite being held in solitary confinement for years, men known as Kinetik, Dhiti, and Brother M, primary leaders of the Free Alabama Movement, have been instrumental in organizing a statewide prison work stoppage in Alabama that began on Sunday, May 1. Currently, the prison labor strike has begun at Alabamas Holman, Staton, and Elmore Correctional Facilities. St. Clair's stoppage will begin on May 9, with Donaldson and other correctional facilities to follow soon after. The current plan is for the work stoppage to last 30 days, although the Movement's leaders said the length of the strike is contingent on the cooperation of legislators in regard to reforming the prison labor system and the conditions of the prisons. The Free Alabama Movement is an activist network of incarcerated men, spanning numerous state prisons across Alabama.

Participants report that, apparently in retaliation against the work stoppage, the entire populations of the striking prisons have been served significantly smaller meal portions this week, a tactic called bird feeding that is sometimes used by prison guards to put pressure on prisoners through malnourishment. They are trying to starve a nigga into compliance, said one man, who estimated that his meals had been reduced by more than 60 percent of his normal serving size. Prisons that have not begun striking, but are soon scheduled to, like St. Clair, are also allegedly being bird-fed. The food is always garbage, said one man, but it's usually a lot more than this.

Additionally, the entire populations of Alabama's striking prisons including the general prison population not usually in 23-hour-a-day segregation have been placed in indefinite solitary confinement. A statement released by the Alabama Department of Corrections calls this a lockdown with limited inmate movement that will persist while ADOC investigates the situation. Holman was also placed on lockdown in March following an uprising in which a correctional officer and the warden were stabbed after intervening in a fight, and prisoners briefly set fire to hallways.

The prisoner work stoppage is a nonviolent protest against many of the conditions in Alabama's prisons, especially against the unpaid prison labor that makes money for private companies and the state of Alabama. During the stoppage, Alabama's incarcerated will refuse to leave their cells to perform the jobs that they usually perform each day for little to no pay. These range from the many jobs that allow the prison to function (such as serving food) to industry jobs (which allow private companies to profit off of prison labor). These industry jobs are the only jobs in Alabama prisons that pay at all, though the pay rates are negligible, ranging from \$0.17 to \$0.30 an hour.

At Holman, the industry jobs are done at the tag plant that makes license plates for the state of Alabama and the sewing factory that makes sheets and pillowcases for Alabama's state prisons. Elmore contains a canning and recycling plant, and St. Clair contains a vehicle restoration and chemical plant that, according to the Free Alabama Movement, produces more than \$25 million worth of chemicals a year.

The use of prison labor in Alabama by private, for-profit companies was legalized by the Alabama state legislature in 2012. We are going to put our prisoners to work. They are going to be paid a reasonable wage, Alabama state representative and bill sponsor Jim McClendon told AL.com at the time. Since then, Alabama has developed 17 different prison labor industries at correctional facilities across the state.

Alabama's incarcerated are regularly charged what they call outrageous fines and fees, despite the fact that they are paid nothing, or only a few cents an hour, for their labor. Our mass incarceration is a form of slavery, because we're not being paid for our work, but we're being charged outrageous fines, one man told Solitary Watch. Required fees include \$4 for armbands, \$4 for identification cards, and \$31.50 for a urinalysis test. Prisoners are charged \$200 to petition a court, which is their only way to file a complaint, since Alabama's prisons have no grievance procedure.

Incarcerated individuals are also charged \$25 dollars for being caught with a cell-phone the first time, \$50 the second time, and \$75 the third. The fine goes up by \$25 each time, despite the fact that correctional officers sell the phones to prisoners, and that the phones are primarily used by the incarcerated to contact their families. These families are required to cover the costs of these fines and fees incurred by their loved ones inside, since prison labor is unpaid or barely paid. This is extortion; there's no other way to put it, said another man.

The Free Alabama Movement is not just hoping for change in the practices of their individual facilities, but for legal change in Montgomery. Our problem is with the legislature, Dhiti told Solitary Watch. No one within these facilities can resolve these issues for us.

We have a spokesperson outside of prison that will give our demands to the state legislature for us.

That spokesperson is Kenneth Sharpton Glasgow, a Dothan, Alabama, pastor and the younger brother of Al Sharpton. Glasgow is the director of The Ordinary Peoples Society (TOPS), a nonprofit that serves as a halfway house for many people recently released from Alabama prisons, providing them food, housing, addiction counseling, and job training. Glasgow has long been an advocate for incarcerated people, having once served 15 years himself on drug-related charges. During the work stoppage, Glasgow said, I am the advocate for the Free Alabama Movement. I am here to make sure their voices are heard.

Last Thursday, Glasgow visited the statehouse in Montgomery to speak to state legislators about the work stoppage and the Movement's demands. Glasgow told Solitary Watch that he will also be back in Montgomery later this week. He said that he had already received supportive comments from the state legislatures Democratic caucus.

When reached for comment, the Alabama Department of Corrections refused to answer specific questions, but pointed to a press release sent out on Monday, May 2, that alleged, despite Glasgows advocacy as a spokesperson for the Free Alabama Movement, that the DOC had not been given any demands, or a reason for refusing to work.

A statement from the Free Alabama Movement, that they said was sent to the Alabama DOC on Monday, makes it clear that their chief demand is the abolition of unpaid prison labor, which they consider to be slavery. The work stoppage is about the 13th Amendment, the Alabama Constitution of 1901 and the Statutory Laws discriminatorily enacted from both, the document states. Currently, the text of the 13th Amendment of the Constitution outlaws slavery for all except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted. Other demands include the improvement of the unsanitary living quarters and drinking water in Alabamas prisons, and the creation of a grievance procedure in Alabamas prisons. We will no longer contribute to our own oppression, Kinetik said. We will no longer continue to work for free and be treated like this. Dhati called the nonviolent work stoppage an economic solution to an economic problem.

What the movement calls their deplorable conditions of confinement refers not only to the cleanliness of the cells, but also to the negligence those in solitary confinement experience. Every cell in the solitary confinement unit at Alabamas Holman State Correctional Facility is equipped with a call button, to be used to summon prison guards for help in an emergency. Despite their apparent function, these buttons fail to send a signal to the guards or elsewhere, so prisoners requests for help often go unheeded.

In 2001, I was the very first person in the segregation unit, and I actually cleaned the white chalk off the walls after they built this place. The buttons have never worked; they serve no purpose, said Kinetik, who has spent the last 27 consecutive months in Holmans solitary confinement unit. There is no ability to communicate emergencies with officers and staff without kicking on the door, screaming and hollering, making as much noise as you can so someone will come out of the cube and assist you.

The 200 men in Homans solitary confinement unit, which has experienced three suicides in recent months, are not only isolated from the general prison population, but also from administrative supervision and medical attention. Allegedly due to funding-related short staffing, guards are rarely present in the solitary unit, and only pass through to deliver meals, and for pill-call, three times a day. The lack of supervision means that medical emergencies like the recent suicides frequently go unattended to for several hours.

At St. Claire Correctional facility, on the other side of the state, conditions are similar. Dhati, who has also been in solitary for twenty-seven months, recalled a recent incident in which a prisoner had been stabbed in the lung and was bleeding out in his cell. Without any guards present, concerned prisoners in the solitary unit started a fire and broke a window so the guards would notice the smoke and come into the unit. Dhati and the other men in the unit had to be treated for smoke inhalation, but the stabbed man survived after the medical attention that followed the fire.

At prisons across the state, the water is said to be badly contaminated and unsafe to drink. You can actually taste the chemicals in the water, one prisoner said. The water looks like fog. You cannot drink it, said another. People at multiple prisons across Alabama spoke of numerous incarcerated individuals developing stomach problems from drinking the water, which the correctional officers apparently never drink, opting to bring in bottled water by the case.

In fact, the guards allegedly encourage the men in their charge to avoid drinking the prisons water, for their own safety. But the only alternative offered to prisoners is a sickly red juice that leaves a stain on stainless steel for years. Since Kinetik, like most of the men, refuses to drink the juice, he sips only enough of the prisons dirty water to stay alive. I drink it very, very sparingly, as necessary, he said. Im constantly dehydrated, my lips are always cracking.

The living conditions being protested by the Free Alabama Movement also include extremely dirty cells and a lack of cleaning materials. Incarcerated men across the state claim that it has been over eight months since they have received any soap or cleaning materials to cleanse their tiny living spaces, where those in solitary spend their entire days. Many attempt to use their own clothing and bathing soap to clean their cells, to little effect. Officers blame the dirty cells on budget issues and short staff, yet the hall floors that the officers work on are reportedly cleaned three times a day. On a day to day basis, Kinetik said, this is one of the most unsanitary and most dangerous places in the state of Alabama.

Jack Denton is a writer based in New York whose work has been published in New York Magazine, Harper's, Pitchfork, Vice, Pacific Standard, NPR Music, and beyond.

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.

What are the action items for this crisis? I could come up with my own list but, if there is already one, I won't be reinventing the wheel and wouldn't be risking being counterproductive to ongoing efforts, while doing my part to make the organized efforts more effective.

Please visit the website of the Free Alabama Movement: <https://freealabamamovement.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/pamphlet-fam-fmm-uspapersize.pdf>

I have been writing about this for years. So many people truly don't know how bad it can be. There are many inmates with no one to fight for them and if a sentence is long they are often forgotten. I write a blog. Come visit. mynameisjamie.net. On it are chapters of a book I'm almost done writing called *Inside The Forbidden Outside*. You can join my mailing list for my newsletter by writing to squick@mynameisjamie.net and typing the word newsletter.

Solitary Watch is one of the best websites out there in support of those incarcerated.

Fuck off liberal

Yep, this is about as much as we can expect from folks like you, and nothing more.

Just as expected.

A note on comments: This is an open forum and we seldom remove a comment, even for stupidity or profanity. However, we will not tolerate threats made against others in the forum, and have therefore removed two others' comments made by you. All comments containing threats, death wishes, and the like will be removed.

just more liberal bull crap. fuck off

Just because you have an open forum doesn't mean you should allow it to become an open sewer. I think Boatandoars proven himself (or herself) unwilling to positively contribute to this conversation.

FASCISTS. Every Alabama politician who supports this, and every private prison worker and executive involved, should be locked up and the key thrown away. THEY are the true criminals.

Organized crime sponsored by the state.

The only outrage is this attempt by felons to be greedy and lazy.

Cheers to the politicians and executives for making sure these low lifes pay their debt to society.

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