

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/07/08/california-prisoners-launch-new-hunger-strike-to-protest-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | July 8, 2013

Hundreds of people held in California prisons are expected to launch their third large-scale hunger strike in two years today. The current strike, announced by leaders at Pelican Bay State Prison on [February 14th](#), is seen as a resumption of the large-scale strikes in [June](#) and September 2011, when thousands of prisoners across the state stopped eating for days or weeks in order to press for the five demands laid out by the strike organizers.

The [five demands](#) are: an end to group punishment, reform of the current process by which individuals are deemed prison gang members, an end to long-term solitary confinement, adequate and nutritious food, and constructive programming. At the heart of the strike is California's unique practice of indefinitely housing suspected gang affiliates in Security Housing Units (SHUs), primarily in solitary confinement until they debrief, or, snitch on fellow gang members.

The prior hunger strikes prompted [two](#) California Assembly [hearings](#) on the issue of segregation in California's prisons, a tepid [reform](#) of gang validation procedures [blasted by SHU prisoners](#), and a [federal lawsuit](#) challenging the gang validation process and mounting an 8th Amendment challenge against long-term solitary confinement. A CDCR attempt to get the lawsuit dismissed was [denied](#) in March, and the *Los Angeles Times* has since [reported](#) that the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) has asked to join the lawsuit in defense of the SHUs.

The epicenter of the strike is the SHU at PBSP in Crescent City, California, a super-maximum security facility opened in 1989 for the [purpose](#) of dealing with difficult-management cases, prison gang members, and violent maximum-security inmates. Over 1,000 people are presently held in the SHU at PBSP, and two thousand additional SHU inmates are held at Corcoran State Prison and Tehachapi State Prison, and many more are held in Administrative Segregation Units (ASU) across the state pending openings in SHU facilities.

In the small, windowless concrete cells designed to limit communication, most in the SHU are held in solitary confinement, sometimes for decades. As of 2011, California held over [500](#) in the SHU for over five years, and 78 for more than 20 years. Increasingly, due to overcrowding, many in the SHU now have cellmates, forced to share a cell designed for only one person.

Like all oppressed people, prisoners confined to these torture units must not only contend with seeking ways to resist the unrelenting, daily assaults on their psyche and humanity, but must also contend with the prospect of people who have never been subjected to the inexorable psychological and physical degradation of being confined to a bathroom with 2 bunks crammed into it for 23-24 hours a day, every day, trying to define *our* reality, [writes](#) a group of men held in the SHU at Corcoran State Prison, validated Black Guerilla Family members who have banded together to form the New Afrikan Revolutionary Nationalism Collective Think Tank (NCTT).

The members of NCTT, including Michael Dorrough and J. Heshima Denham, who have corresponded with Solitary Watch, have spent over a decade in the SHU (largely in solitary confinement, until recently) and participated in the 2011 hunger strikes. California prison officials have used their political writings as evidence of Black Guerilla Family gang involvement and thereby continued confinement in the SHU; the BGF was founded as a black nationalist-Marxist-oriented prison organization by prisoner George Jackson in the 1960s. California prison officials see it as a gang, and has a practice of using [political writings](#) as evidence of [gang activity](#). Both Dorrough and Denham insist that they are New Afrikan political thinkers, not BGF members.

The majority of individuals in the SHU are there for being deemed (validated) members of one of the following prison gangs: Aryan Brotherhood, Nazi Low Riders, Black Guerilla Family, Northern Structure, Nuestra Familia, Mexican Mafia, and the Texas Syndicate. The leaders of the hunger strike are said to be high ranking members of the Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerilla Family, Mexican Mafia, and Nuestra Familia.

The strikers have [argued](#) that only violent acts and repeated rule violations should justify confinement in the SHU, not merely accusations of gang involvement. While [many states](#) segregate gang members from the general population, California is unique in its policy of indefinite segregation in solitary confinement for gang affiliation.

Ahead of the strike, prison guards have allegedly engaged in sleep deprivation tactics against inmates at Pelican Bay, with welfare checks being conducted every 30-minutes waking up prisoners, [according](#) to Isaac Ontiveros and Azedeh Zohrabi of the Prisoner Hunger

Strike Solidarity Coalition. There are no reports that the prior welfare check system ever involved intentionally waking up those in the SHU unnecessarily. The policy, which can be read [here](#), includes the statement that there is no need to awaken inmates if staff can see that the inmates are breathing and not actively involved in self-injurious or life-threatening behavior.

As was reported throughout the prior two strikes, Pelican Bay strike leader Todd Ashker has told Solitary Watch that his mail has been disrupted. They've been trashing my mail the last four months, he writes. Denham and Dorrough at Corcoran have [reportedly](#) had their cell shaken down in March, with paperwork taken from them. Solitary Watch endeavors to provide updates about the hunger strike as information comes in. Individuals with information are encouraged to contact the writer at: Sal.Solitary@gmail.com.

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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Great article! Please visit <http://carlos-breakingboundaries.blogspot.de/> to get more information on how to support the prisoners.

Give your public opinion support of the prisoners to:

Governor Jerry Brown
c/o State Capitol, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Phone: (916) 445-2841
Fax: (916) 558-3160

a very interesting article, this should be shown to kids in school to help frighten them out of not committing crimes and going to prison, probably wouldn't work, our prison system is backwards.

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