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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/06/05/prisoners-in-solitary-confinement-in-ohio-stage-two-week-hunger-strike/>

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by [Hannah Taleb](#) | June 5, 2012

Recent hunger strikes at supermax prisons [Virginia](#) and [California](#) have gained a lot of public attention, but they are a part of a larger movement of hunger strikes in solitary confinement units across the nation. A less publicized strike occurred at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown [last month](#) and lasted for over two weeks. All of the prisoners on strike were held in the highest levels of security in the Ohio state prison system levels 4 and 5. Prisoners at these levels are held in 7 x 11-foot solitary confinement cells, many for 23 hours a day. The strike swelled to include 48 prisoners missing at least nine meals in a row.

The two primary [demands](#) of the strike were for lower commissary prices and for a more transparent security level classification process. In conjunction with a lowering of commissary prices, which can be set up to a 35 percent mark-up, the striking prisoners were demanding an increase in state pay, which currently is only \$9 dollars a month. The small food portions served at the prison force many prisoners to buy supplemental food from commissary at these unaffordable rates. Other grievances included the lack of any enrichment programming as well as the inadequate medical care at OSP, which has declined sharply due to austerity cuts by the prison.

Security level classification at OSP is similar to many other solitary units, consisting of a step-down program with increased privileges with each decrease in security level. Once a prisoner transitions from level 4 they are transferred to regular population at another prison. There are no set guidelines for how long prisoners can or should be held at each security level, and therefore there can be no oversight of the program.

Prisoners classified at the highest level of security, level 5b, are given only five hours of solo recreation per week, must wear handcuffs during visits and must be escorted any time out of cell. Though prisoners at security level 5b are reviewed every 90 days, it is rare that any prisoner, including those who remain misconduct free, can expect to level down for at least a year. Also, prisoners have called attention to the fact that recently the number of level 4 and 5 prisoners has increased from 270 to over 400 because the removal of death row prisoners from OSP left additional cells to fill. One prisoner, writing to the Red Bird Prison Abolition group, wrote that someone who used to be sent to the hole for 16 days, now might be dropped a level 4 to 5 as a way to keep the units full. Another grievance submitted by the striking prisoners referenced the increase in misconducts issued for petty violations, like not returning a food tray to the slot.

Warden David Bobby first met with representatives of the striking prisoners on May 2. This meeting resulted in the warden setting up a committee to review commissary prices in comparison with other prisons. The Warden would meet with the representatives another time before the strike officially ended on May 8, with all striking prisoners eating by lunch that day. According to reports from reliable sources in contact with the those on the inside, striking prisoners found Warden Bobby to be reasonable at the negotiations, and most of their demands were met. The exact terms of the negotiations are still unclear.

Ohio State Penitentiary was opened in 1998 as a super maximum security prison as a response to what is known as the [Lucasville Uprising](#) the 1993 prisoner rebellion at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, during which one guard was killed. Public outcry over the event was enough to justify the \$65 million dollars in construction costs, and drastic increase in the states super maximum security level prisoners.

This most recent hunger strike at OSP was the second this year, the first taking place in February during the nationally coordinated Occupy for Prisons actions. Prisoners have stated that the strike this month was a direct response to demands in February not being met, specifically the demands for lower commissary prices.

Four prisoners, Siddique Abdullah Hasan, Keith LaMar, Jason Robb, and Namir Abdul Mateen, serving time at OSP after being charged for the Lucasville Uprising, also [staged a hunger strike](#) in January of 2011. The conclusion of that strike was the successful negotiation of demands pertaining to the incredibly harsh terms of their imprisonment, which included never being allowed to be in the presence of another prisoner. Their success has been cited as one of the inspirations for the hunger strike at Pelican Bay State Prison in California in June 2011.

Aside from previous strikes, the strike this month comes after almost two decades of attempts at reform at OSP, including a 2002 lawsuit, [Wilkinson v. Austin](#), that went to the U.S. Supreme Court, and successfully won outdoor recreational facilities for all prisoners as well as some expansion of review procedures. What has not changed is the practice of warehousing prisoners in long-term solitary

confinement with little or no chance for release. In an Amicus brief for *Wilkinson v. Austin*, the ACLU described the conditions in which prisoners at OSP live:

High maximum security (Level 5) prisoners at OSP are locked in single cells except for approximately five one-hour periods per week. Each cell measures approximately 89.7 square feet, has a sink and toilet, a small desk, a concrete immovable stool, a narrow concrete slab with a thin mattress, and a narrow window to the outside that cannot be opened and that does not comply with the standards of the American Correctional Association.

Unlike cells in any other Ohio prison or even segregation unit, OSP has solid steel cell doors with metal strips along the sides and bottoms of the doors that do not allow conversation with adjacent inmates. The conditions at the OSP do not allow any amelioration of the prolonged isolation designed into the OSP's structure.

Prisoners at OSP have extremely limited contact with other individuals. Phone calls can be made only to approved persons; an unsuccessful attempt may count as one of one or two ten-minute phone calls allowed per month. Any time prisoners leave their cellblocks, they are strip-searched, shackled and placed in full restraints, which include an uncomfortable black box that holds their hands in a rigid position. OSP inmates are strip-searched before and after visits even though physical contact with visitors, who are behind solid glass, is impossible.

No work assignments are offered other than one porters job in each pod. There are no educational programs beyond the GED level, which, the court found, reach the prisoner through closed-circuit TV and self-study workbooks, and offer no human contact. There are no vocational or jobreadiness programs. Prisoners are not permitted to share books, magazines, or other personal property. Prisoners may be punished if they save a piece of bread or a packet of sugar from a food tray for a snack at a later time, or place any photographs or other items on the cell walls.

Hannah Taleb was a research and reporting intern for Solitary Watch.

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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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