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<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/08/10/at-san-quentin-a-desperate-man-goes-on-hunger-strike-to-protest-conditions-in-a-covid-19-isolation-unit/>

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by [Juan Moreno Haines](#) | August 10, 2020

Editors Note: Juan Moreno Haines is an award-winning journalist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison and a member of the Society of Professional Journalists. In February, before the pandemic visibly hit the United States, Haines wrote a prescient [piece](#) that was published in The Appeal (and supported by a grant from the [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#)) documenting how San Quentin officials used a solitary confinement block to house people sick with the flu, instead of providing the necessary medical care.

At the end of May, [more than 120 men were transferred to San Quentin](#), which until then was coronavirus-free, from the California Institution for Men in Chino, where there was a known outbreak. The men were not tested before being moved. Since the transfer, [more than 2,150 people in San Quentin](#) over two-thirds of the prison population have contracted the virus. Haines has reported on the increased use of solitary confinement to house people who are sick or have tested positive. He has [continued to do so](#) even after contracting the virus himself and being placed in solitary confinement himself.

For this article, Haines interviewed Christopher Hickson, who was on a hunger strike to protest San Quentins handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Hickson, who had tested positive for COVID, had been transferred to another housing unit, where he said the living conditions were filthy and lacked electricity in the cells.

Christopher Hickson, 39, better known as Max, has served 21 years on a sentence of 20-to-life for attempted murder in California. His first parole board hearing is scheduled for October 2021. For the past three years, Hickson has been at San Quentin State Prison, where he has participated in programming, taken community college classes, and played on a baseball team that competes against minor league baseball clubs on the outside.

I spoke with Hickson on July 4, while he was on hunger strike over COVID-related conditions in San Quentin, and again on July 11, about the results of his strike.

On Saturday morning, June 27, 2020, I was told by a corrections officer I was positive for having COVID 19, Hickson told me in early July. I felt devastated. I have watched on television and read about it. I feared for my life because of how many precious lives this virus has taken.

Originally, I was told that I would remain at my cell in North Block and would be quarantined there, Hickson said. That made sense because if you isolate me from any movement, there's no such thing as spreading the virus. Moving me from building to building defeats the purpose of stopping the spread. But that evening, Hickson said the prison moved him and about 60 others who had tested positive from the North Block to Badger Section, a reception center at San Quentin usually used to house people who have recently arrived into the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Hickson said the Badger Section was in disarray, with dust and dirt everywhere.

I was already fearing for my life because of COVID-19, but from the looks of just the buildings dayroom, stairs, and rails, I had to be fearful of catching a staph infection as well, he said. In that moment, and before I arrived to my cell, it was clear Badger was not meant to be for any COVID-19 conditioned inmate or anything else for that matter. When I got to my cell, the walls were sticky and filthy. The floor had dirt and dust balls that reminded me of tumbleweeds. And the toilet and sink had grime and rust as clear evidence this cell had not been cleaned for some time.

Part I: July 4

Juan Moreno Haines: When and why did you go on hunger strike?

Christopher Max Hickson: I decided to go on hunger strike on June 29, after listening to correctional officers who are being forced by upper administration to work in these hostile, dangerous, COVID-19 infected conditions.

I am striking because this same administration decided to allow transfers of inmates from the California Institute for Men to San Quentin, when we had no cases. Now we have over 1,400 cases, me included. I am striking because after that transfer lesson, we are still being moved around, spreading this virus to other inmates and staff, who have families.

I am striking because of the horrible conditions in Badger Building, which lacks cleaning supplies. We are served cold food. We have no electrical power in the cells. We are provided minimal health and mental health care. I am striking for the COVID-19 inmates who are being mishandled in how we are being housed. [COVID-19 inmates continue to be double-housed.] I am striking for the safety of the inmate population and the staff who are working at ground zero around this virus, while trying to maintain the daily activities happening within all prisons.

JMH: How are you being treated since you've begun your hunger strike?

Max: Because my situation with the hunger strike is gaining media attention, I have been talked to by the administration, but it's from a standpoint of me being some kind of adversary. Line correctional staff is not necessarily adversarial towards me.

JMH: What do you want correctional officials to do in order for you to end your hunger strike?

Max: Put all these inmates back in the building from which they came. If inmates get sick, do not move them. Isolate them in their cells and care for them there. Moving inmates from building to building, institution to institution, is defeating the goal of stopping the spread of the virus. I would like for correctional officials to really listen to the inmate population and staff who are working at ground zero. Make common sense decisions based on that, and not from the misguided political establishment.

JMH: What would you say to free people about having COVID-19 while in prison, and the care given to you and other prisoners?

Max: The thing is I understand and have empathy for everyone and everything going on out there. Many of us in here have asked to do something to help, as little as donate blood, but have been shut down.

We understand this is a human crisis. We, in here, just ask that the people in charge of California prisons, from top brass down to the correctional officer walking the tiers, have empathy for us and our situation and circumstances, as if they were in our shoes. Some may say, I could never be in your shoes. I say to them, You never made a mistake in life and had to pay for it? All life matters!

Part II: July 11

JMH: How were you doing medially, leading up to your conversation with correctional officials on July 7?

Max: So, after learning earlier in the day that I was literally the only remaining hunger striker, I felt much more of a responsibility than when I started the strike to see it through. However, for the last couple of days, leading up to this day, my body was breaking down a bit because of the lack of food intake. I was quite tired, unable to really speak, and my right arm was very weak. And I was obviously very hungry.

These issues resulted in me being escorted to medical for evaluation, where it was the collective opinion of the nurses and doctors that my immune system was already compromised with me being positive of COVID 19 and that not eating could make COVID lethal for me. One doctor asked me flat out, Do you want to die? I responded with, No, but I am willing to do whatever it takes for change.

I believe that in that moment some form of higher power heard me heard the voices and pleas of the struggling inmate population in Badger, because after my evaluation, there was the captain of A Yard (Badger) waiting to speak with me.

JMH: Talk about that conversation.

Max: Before I could speak a word, she went straight into the state of things not only in Badger, but across the entire facility in regards to custody dealing with COVID inmates and procedures. I got the feeling of exhaustion and frustration over procedures that were not consistent. It became very clear to me that there is a struggle between custody officials and medical officials as to the direction of decisions and procedures for San Quentin.

The captain then asked me what I was trying to accomplish, to which I responded by speaking to the poor conditions in Badger, along with things the population were not receiving (cleaning supplies, canteen, hot meals, electricity), and possibly moving inmates back to their respective buildings before being moved to Badger.

The captain apparently already knew of our positions on these living conditions, and told me the population would be receiving canteen and allowed packages, there would be a vendor bringing in our meals, cleaning supplies and writing materials would be given to the inmates, and electricity was in the process of being restored in Badger.

In regards to returning inmates to their previous housing assignments before Badger, she said that would take some time but eventually it would happen.

JMH: Explain why you're satisfied with the results of your hunger strike.

Max: I was satisfied with what my hunger strike accomplished at different points. But first before I saw electricians coming in the building going cell to cell restoring power; before we saw canteen being brought to the building and distributed; before the correctional officers started giving out powdered bleach for inmates to clean their cells, and envelopes to write their families; before package catalogs were passed out the Badger population; before we started receiving warm meals from outside vendors (three times a day); before all these things started to happen it was most satisfying to have that conversation with the captain.

It wasn't an inmate versus staff sort of conversation. It was a conversation between two humans versus COVID conditions, about what needs to be done no agendas, no politics, no egos, only solutions and cooperation via communication something we all hope translates to

the public.

JMH: What do you want to say in closing?

Max: Change starts from within. We are all part of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation prison system. We need to make it work for all of us involved if not for ourselves, then maybe for our families and friends who are a part of us.

Juan Moreno Haines is a journalist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison and senior editor at the award-winning San Quentin News. A member of the Society of Professional Journalists, he was awarded its Silver Heart Award for being a voice for the voiceless. His work has appeared in The Guardian, The Appeal, Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal, Above the Law, UCLA Law Review, Life of the Law, The Oakland Post, LA Progressive, and CalMatters, among others. In 2020, he received the PEN Prison Writing Contests Fielding A. Dawson Prize in Fiction.

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