

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/07/14/starving-in-solitary-california-prison-hunger-strikers-health-declines-but-state-will-not-negotiate/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | July 14, 2011

It's been two weeks since a group of inmates in Pelican Bay State Prison's Security Housing Unit stopped eating. Their hunger strike was launched to protest [conditions in solitary confinement](#) in California's oldest and largest supermax, where they spend at least 22 1/2 hours a day locked down in their cells, and the remaining time alone in concrete exercise yards. Many have been in the SHU for years or even decades, with little hope of ever leaving it alive in an extreme situation that, to their minds, called for extreme measures.

Since the strike began, it has spread to 13 of the state's 33 prisons, where according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's own figures some 6,600 have refused at least some meals. But the heart of the protest remains in the SHUs at Corcoran State Prison and at Pelican Bay, where a core group of several dozen men say they are committed to taking this all the way to the death, if necessary, according to strike organizer Todd Ashker.

Information from this prison-within-a-prison is by nature difficult to come by and impossible to verify, but news of the strikers trickles out through family members and supporters. Today, the [Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition](#) reports that it received an urgent update from medical staff at Pelican Bay. According to the coalition, a source with access to the current medical conditions who prefers to be unnamed said: The prisoners are progressing rapidly to the organ-damaging consequences of dehydration. They are not drinking water and have decompensated rapidly. A few have tried to sip water but are so sick that they are vomiting it back up. Some are in renal failure and have been unable to make urine for 3 days. Some are having measured blood sugars in the 30 range, which can be fatal if not treated. Family members who visited SHU prisoners over the weekend [have reported](#) that they are visibly thinner, sicker, and weaker.

How long does it take for a man on hunger strike to starve to death? The answer depends on what kind of physical shape that man was in to begin with, but in any case, it doesn't take long. The body begins feeding on itself after just 24 hours without food. It usually begins to show severe symptoms of starvation, including organ failure, [at about five weeks](#). Without fluids, death comes much sooner, typically in [less than two weeks](#). In 1981, it took the ten Irish Republican hunger strikers (who were drinking water) from [46 to 73 days](#) to die in Britain's Maze Prison outside Belfast.

Will it come to this in California? Based on the response so far from the state of California, it appears that it could.

The hunger strikers' list of [five core demands](#) is far from radical. In large part, it is based on the recommendations of the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons, which in 2006 called for substantial reforms to the practice of solitary confinement. Segregation from the general prison population, the commission said, should be a last resort, and even in segregation units, isolation should be mitigated and terms should be limited. Beyond this, the strikers want an end to group punishments, and to the system of gang validation and debriefing by which prisoners are held in the SHU indefinitely, and released only when they snitch on others. And they want provision of adequate food and constructive programming and privileges for indefinite SHU status inmates.

Supporters say that the demands are negotiable, and the strikers have communicated that they would welcome outside mediators. But the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is not going to be coerced or manipulated, spokesperson Terry Thornton told the [New York Times](#), explaining the CDCR's steadfast position against negotiating with the hunger strikers.

The responses thus far from the CDCR have been uniformly hostile and sometimes dismissive. Thornton told a [California public radio](#) reporter that prisoners might be clandestinely eating. Some inmates have been seen eating food items that they've purchased from the canteen, she claimed. Some have not. Some inmates are refusing to be weighed. That may be an indication that they are eating. It's really hard to say because they're refusing that medical evaluation.

California prisons are being monitored by the federal government, in response to conditions so poor as to be intolerable with the concept of human dignity, according to a recent landmark decision by the Supreme Court. But the court-appointed federal receiver in charge of prison health care, likewise dismissed reports that some prisoners' health problems were growing dire. I think the information that's in the news release is largely exaggerated, Nancy Kincaid [told the radio station](#). At this time we have no inmates who are refusing liquids and we have no report of inmates who are refusing medication. There are inmates who are refusing medical care. They have the right to do

that.

Thornton has also told the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) that the prisoners should make their demands heard through other means. There are appropriate ways of registering your concerns, she said, and even though this hunger strike has been peaceful, this is not the way to register those concerns. But prisoners say they have pursued these other means, and found them futile. The basis for this protest has come about after over 25 years, some of us 30, some up to 40 years, of being subjected to these conditions, [Todd Ashker said](#) in a statement released by lawyers. Of our 602 appeals, numerous court challenges have gotten nowhere.

In addition, some of the prisoners have been in the SHU long enough to remember the [hunger strike](#) that took place exactly 10 years ago, when 600 Pelican Bay prisoners stopped eating for 10 days, and the CDCR agreed to reviews its policies on gang validation and debriefing. A decade later, inmates say, virtually nothing has changed.

They are protesting conditions that they say are torturous and inhumane, Molly Porzig of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition told the *Chronicle*. They feel the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will not make any meaningful or long-term change until they start dying, and they're willing to take it there.

Asked to comment on the strike, David Fathi, director of the ACLU National Prison Project, said: Its testimony to the suffering caused by solitary confinement that some prisoners are apparently willing to starve themselves to death rather than continue to live under those conditions.



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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.

I am half tempted to say we should start organizing a hunger strike in sympathy. I don't know how much difference it would make though coming from us outside of California.

It's obvious the aforementioned poster: Total reality isn't in reality at all. He mentions DUI, Drugs, Weapons charges, well unless there's a victim of the DUI, or drugs what crime has been committed? Under the Constitutions written pursuant to the Common Law which are statutes are supposed to comply with, there has to be a victim = an injured or damaged party if you do drugs, drink etc and don't hurt anyone but yourself, there isn't a crime under the Common Law. Additionally weapons charges are a new development, as pursuant to Amendment the 2nd, you have an absolute right to keep, bear, and arm yourself against aggressive people, and to use them if necessary! Now this corporate state is trying to diminish and take that Right away from you. I was stopped once with a gun in my car in a gun case, and was treated as a criminal, even though it was only for defense and self protection. The other crimes he listed (supra) are crimes, as a victim exists, and people should be punished, but the time should fit the crime! 25 years to life for stealing a piece of pizza as a third strike is ludicrous & shocking. Taking one's liberty, freedom of movement, and ability to function in the outside society is a punishment, Nixon said his name being tarnished was a punishment to him. Spiro Agnew should have went to prison, it pays to have good lawyers and know people in high places I guess, even though it's said, we're all equal under the law LOL These lawmakers have gone way too far and extreme in their efforts to get tough on crime. To require someone to debrief (inform/snitch) in order to be considered for release from solitary, is asking the inmate to issue a death sentence on themselves, as they surely will be a target for attack by other inmates who perceive them as a rat. Some may invent false stories about others in order to secure their release from a SHU. Furthermore I don't believe in group punishment, these are the techniques of Stalin, Kaganovich, Lenin, Mao, Hitler et al. Teach people to be personally responsible for their actions and behavior, not all others. How would you like to be held responsible for your neighbors actions and possibly arrested for their activities & crimes? That's what the CDC policy is tantamount to! There are sadistic prison guards who take pleasure in hurting the

inmates, probably a minority, but that mentality does exist. Their Outlaws and Cowards with a badge.

TODAY: Take Action! Call NOW EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT IN CALIFORNIA.

Governor Jerry Brown: 916-445-2841 Hi my name is _____. Im calling about the statewide prisoner hunger strike that began at Pelican Bay .

I support the end of the use of long-term solitary confinement. I am alarmed by the rapidly deteriorating medical conditions of the hunger strikers & the inaction of the prison system Thank you.

Prison Secretary Matthew Cate: 916-323-6001

Hi my name is _____.

Im calling about the statewide prisoner hunger strike that began at Pelican Bay. I support the prisoners that long-term solitary confinement should end. I am alarmed by the rapidly deteriorating medical conditions of the hunger strikers & the inaction of the prison system.

Thank You.

Geplaatst door Prison Watch Network op 1:26 AM

Email This Blog This! Share to Twitter Share to Facebook Share to Google Buzz

Labels: actions, hungerstrikes, N.C.T.T. Corcoran SHU, Pelican Bay Collective Hungerstrike

<http://californiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com/search/label/N.C.T.T.%20Corcoran%20SHU>

The hunger strike is indeed a bad thing but each inmate has a choice on doing it. The straight and skinny of it is if they dont want to be in those kinds of conditions then DONT DO SOMETHING THAT WILL PUT YOU IN PRISON!!! Im so sick of people having such a bleeding heart for convicted criminals that are in the place they rightfully should be for the crime they committed. On top of that, the criminals in prisons that think they should be treated like normal people!! Hello!! Youve committed a crime against somebody and you now have to pay for it moron!! You lost your rights when you decided on committing that crime!! How about the rights of the victims?! Do they ever get over the crime that you committed against them? NO!! That is with them forever and you expect to have certain conditions in your prison home? Did your victim get to express the need or want for their conditions when you committed the crime against them? NO!! You didnt give a crap about anybody but yourself at the time except for what benefitted youie robbery, rape, drugs, murder, assault, kidnapping, manslaughter, DUI, weapons charges blah blah blah. Get the picture? If you want to starve yourself to death then its a bad deal for you and your family because once again you are choosing to do something stupid that makes people suffer. Just like the decision you made to get yourself in there to begin with. And most people that are in solitary are in there for a reason. Usually for being violent or because they cant get along with general population for some reason or another and its not for anything like they argue over crossword puzzle solutions either!!! Its always something bad people!!! If they starve to death its by their own choice.

A DIRECT CALL FOR A STATEWIDE WORK STRIKE

SUPPORTING THE HUNGER STRIKE TO ABOLISH SHU POLICIES

An indefinite hunger strike began on 1st July by the prisoners held in the Pelican Bay Security Housing unit (SHU). They have been joined by prisoners in the Corcoran and Folsom SHUs. Huge amounts of domestic and foreign support has been organized for these prisoners. In order to win this struggle, however, every available resource must be brought into play. We are at a historical juncture in which prisoners can take control of their lives, to have some say in the conditions in which they are expected to exist, or else they will continue to be mere pawns acted upon by external forces and watch things get even worse.

Starting IMMEDIATELY, defendants/prisoners can start the process of improving their conditions of existence by implementing a peaceful work strike in every prison in the state. Defendants may draft demands as each facility sees fit, however, the first demand on the list must be to implement the core demands of the prisons held in the SHUs,.

The longest prison work strike in US history was at the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla in 1978 which lasted for 47 days. It resulted in the release of the Walla Walla Brothers from the SHU, the Director of Corrections, Harold Bradley, being fired, the warden removed and the associate warden of custody transferred to a youth facility. Work strikes can and do result in positive change!

In the recent Georgia strike, prisoners in every prison went on a statewide peaceful work strike. The prisoners were supported by their families and friends, who helped spread the word of the planned strike to other prisons and found supportive groups in a wide variety of communities to bring information about the prisoners conditions and bring attention to their demands.

Plaintiffs and prisoners want to do the same thing here in California.

It is up to YOU to get this message to everyone you trust at your prison and to spread the word across all yards. You are being asked to tell other prisoners that, STARTING IMMEDIATELY, no work will be performed.

NO WORK means no kitchen, no hospital, no anything, NO EXCEPTIONS.

Anyone advocating violence is a provocateur and listening to such people will on result in defeat. The struggle must be solid and

protracted. Plaintiffs on the outside will provide support by amplifying your choice. If you are not the person to get this done, then please give this document to someone you think is.

Lets recap

Effective IMMEDIATELY prisoners initiate a peaceful work stoppage at all prisons.

Nobody works no exceptions.

The Walla Walla record is 47 days (it will take time to change public consciousness).

There must be NO VIOLENCE of any nature.

The first demand to be amended is debriefing, as it is known in SHU prison policy, will no longer be tolerated or permitted and considered a crime committed by the institutions that seek it as a means of control.

The strike is over when the prisoners win or are defeated. (WE WILL NOT BE DEFEATED!)

If core demands are not met, then the strike may continue at that individual facility.

The first step of becoming part of prisoner history is to communicate the essence of this document to others on the inside. This message is going into prisons across the state by this and other means.

This is NOW a nationwide effort so please repost, repost, repost on all social networking sites.

Send this to everyone in every prison by every means possible.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

Could you please give us an address to write to in support of the hunger strikers? Thank you.

Kate, this site has advice on things you can do to support the hunger strike, including writing to public officials:
<http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/take-action/>

To write letters of support to the strikers youd need their individual names and addresses. A few of these can be found in the following posts:

<http://solitarywatch.com/2011/07/01/voices-from-solitary-letter-from-a-pelican-bay-hunger-striker/>

<http://sfbayview.com/2011/letters-from-hugo-pinell-and-other-hunger-strikers-rally-to-support-the-hunger-strikers/>

Please remember the suffering of Americas prisoners who are kept in isolation. The suffering caused by this inhumane practice must be stopped. Long term isolation is used throughout Americas prison systems even for our most seriously mentally ill. This practice must be stopped if we are to regain our dignity as a nation.

This is so heart breaking. It is indeed a testament to the suffering that long term isolation causes to the human soul. I pray America wakes up and realizes prisoners are human beings with a God given right to their dignity and humanity. Americas prison system is tearing at the core of our founding principles. The worth of the human soul created by God can not be taken away by steel bars and concrete. My prayers are with all who suffer in Americas isolation units especially the mentally ill and their families.

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