



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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California inmates hunger strike for humane conditions of confinement, 2011

Time period notes: *Reportedly, a few California prisons are continuing to strike (as of November 2011), but prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison, the initiators of the campaign, have called off the hunger strike.*

1 July

2011

to: October

2011

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: California

Location Description: Pelican Bay Prison

Goals:

"5 Core Demands:

1. Eliminate group punishments. Instead, practice individual accountability. When an individual prisoner breaks a rule, the prison often punishes a whole group of prisoners of the same race. This policy has been applied to keep prisoners in the SHU indefinitely and to make conditions increasingly harsh.

??2. Abolish the debriefing policy and modify active/inactive gang status criteria. Prisoners are accused of being active or inactive participants of prison gangs using false or highly dubious evidence, and are then sent to longterm isolation (SHU). They can escape these tortuous conditions only if they 'debrief,' that is, provide information on gang activity. Debriefing produces false information (wrongly landing other prisoners in SHU, in an endless cycle) and can endanger the lives of debriefing prisoners and their families.??

3. Comply with the recommendations of the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons (2006) regarding an end to longterm solitary confinement. This bipartisan commission specifically recommended to 'make segregation a last resort' and 'end conditions of isolation.' Yet as of May 18, 2011, California kept 3,259 prisoners in SHUs and hundreds more in Administrative Segregation waiting for a SHU cell to open up. Some prisoners have been kept in isolation for more than thirty years.

??4. Provide adequate and nutritious food. Prisoners report unsanitary conditions and small quantities of food that do not conform to prison regulations. There is no accountability or independent quality control of meals.??

5. Expand and provide constructive programs and privileges for indefinite SHU inmates. The hunger strikers are pressing for opportunities 'to engage in self-help treatment, education, religious and other productive activities...' Currently these opportunities are routinely denied, even if the prisoners want to pay for correspondence courses themselves. Examples of privileges the prisoners want are: one phone call per week, and permission to have sweatsuits and watch caps. (Often warm clothing is denied, though the cells and exercise cage can be bitterly cold.) All of the privileges mentioned in the demands are already allowed at other SuperMax prisons (in the federal prison system and other states)."

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › online blog
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › online blog
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › online blog

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › online blog

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › online blog
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Notes on Methods:

Three inmates committed suicide during the strike. This is controversial as a method of nonviolent direct action 1) because the prison advocates and the prison administration cannot agree that they were part of the campaign, 2) because suicide as an acceptable nonviolent tactic is still being heavily debated among activists, academics, and others

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- prisoners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Not known

Partners:

California Prison Focus and Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition

External allies:

Prison Law Office

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Prison Law Office

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 20 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Prison guards refusing medication and water to prisoners in an effort to break the strike.

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

In 2011, the prisoners of California's Pelican Bay State Prison declared that they had endured enough inhumane conditions of

confinement. On 1 July, 6,000 prisoners initiated the largest prison hunger strike in California's history.

Prisoners at Pelican Bay had been complaining about inhumane and torturous treatment in the security housing units (SHU) since the early 1990s. They even organized an earlier hunger strike campaign from 2001-2002 (See "California inmates hunger strike to end 'gang member' label by prison, 2001-02"). By 2011, they had constructed "5 Core Demands": 1) Eliminate group punishments, 2) Abolish the debriefing policy and modify active/inactive gang status criteria, 3) Comply with the recommendations of the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons (2006) regarding an end to longterm solitary confinement, 4) Provide adequate and nutritious food, and 5) Expand and provide constructive programs and privileges for indefinite SHU inmates. It is interesting to note, that the expanded statements provide an in-depth look at the campaign as a crying out against institutionalized racism and oppression in prison procedure (See expanded view under "Goals").

One of the key pieces of the prisoners' demands was their stance against "gang validation." First, a prisoner would be placed in solitary confinement after being validated as a gang member, under conditions many experts have deemed torturous both psychologically and physically. The only way of escaping these conditions would be to "debrief," or provide information about gang activity. According to the inmates, debriefing often involved providing false information, endangering innocent inmates, their families, and friends. Many inmates remained in confinement for decades. This gang validation procedure has not been used conservatively. As of May 2011, over 3,000 prisoners have been placed in SHU even though the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons recommended that they make "segregation a last resort" and "end conditions of isolation" (2006).

In April the prisoners announced their plans for the July strike: We will "begin an indefinite hunger strike in order to draw attention to, and to peacefully protest, 25 years of torture via CDCR's arbitrary, illegal, and progressively more punitive policies and practices." On 30 June, the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition held a rally and a press conference to give voice to the prisoners, later, opening an online petition for solidarity.

The prisoners began refusing food on 1 July as America was preparing to celebrate its freedom. Soon prisoners from all over California joined the hunger strike growing the participation numbers from the original 6,000 to 12,000. They continued to strike for approximately three weeks. At that point, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) announced that they would make concessions.

However, the prisoners organized another strike on 26 September stating that the CDCR had failed to honor their concessions. They claimed that they were being treated even worse than before. Allegedly, the staff was trying to force the inmates to react violently in anger in order to reframe the case in their favor. In addition, three inmates committed suicide during this time. Prison advocates say that those three inmates were participants in the strike although the staff denies their participation.

After three weeks, Pelican Bay prisoners called off the strike when the CDCR sent out a memo that announced a comprehensive review of every prisoner in the SHUs. This review would also evaluate the gang validation procedure. The review is predicted to begin as soon as the beginning of 2012. At this time (November 2011), none of the prisoners demands have been instated, however a thorough review is a step towards those goals.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

According to newspapers, hunger strikes are continuing in other prisons even though they have ended at the main sites (as of November 2011).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hannah Lehmann, 27/11/2011

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