

Prisoners demand ‘our human rights’

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Atlanta

Published Dec 15, 2010 10:14 PM

According to reports from family members and prisoner rights advocates, thousands of incarcerated men throughout Georgia engaged in a coordinated strike starting Dec. 9. They refused to go to work or participate in other assignments or activities, but stayed in their cells, calling it a “lockdown for liberty.”

Using unauthorized cell phones, the prisoners have been able to organize among themselves and to communicate with news media and supporters.

What is so extraordinary about this action besides its statewide character is its unity among the prisoners — Black, Latino, white, Muslims, Christians, Rastafarians — to achieve their central demand to be treated as human beings, not slaves or animals.



The Georgia Department of Corrections has refused to provide any information to date but did release a short statement on Dec. 9 claiming that no job action had taken place and nothing unusual was happening.

Emily Guzman and her son, Logan, ready to march to detention center in Georgia.

Photo: Jim Toran

However, the DOC acknowledged that based on the “rumor” of a strike, wardens at four facilities had ordered a general “lockdown” of the institution to prevent any disruption. A lockdown means that all prisoners are confined to their cells and no visitors or phone calls are allowed.

Inmate families and community organizers such as Elaine Brown, a former leader of the Black Panther Party and longtime prisoner rights activist, have received numerous phone calls recounting instances of violence and

intimidation by prison guards and officials in response to this peaceful protest.

At Augusta State Prison, at least six prisoners were dragged from their cells and beaten, resulting in broken ribs and other serious injuries.

At Telfair State Prison, guards rampaged through the cells, destroying personal property while searching for contraband cell phones.

At Macon State Prison, the prison authorities first shut off the heat as temperatures dropped below freezing and then, on the second day of the strike, also cut off the hot water.

An unknown number of prisoners have been taken to isolation or “the hole” at the various facilities.

Georgia, having the fifth largest U.S. prison population, has more than 100 prisons, work camps and other detention centers. It is estimated that one in 13 adult Georgians are under some sort of legal control by the state — in prison or jail, on parole or out on bond with charges pending, or under some sort of court or correctional supervision.

In a message sent from a prisoner on day 3 of the strike, he urged, “Don’t Give Up Now! On Monday, when the doors (to the cells — DM) open, close them. Do Not Go To Work.”

Prior to the strike, the prisoners issued a statement outlining nine specific demands:

- **A living wage for work:** In violation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting slavery and involuntary servitude, the DOC demands prisoners work for free.
- **Educational opportunities:** For the great majority of prisoners, the DOC denies all opportunities for education beyond the GED, despite the benefit to both prisoners and society.
- **Decent health care:** In violation of the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishments, the DOC denies adequate medical care to prisoners, charges excessive fees for the most minimal care and is responsible for extraordinary pain and suffering.



Members of the Concerned Coalition to Respect Prisoners’ Rights and All of Us or None of Us protest at the Mound Road prison in Detroit Dec. 14.

WW photo: Bryan G. Pfeifer

- **An end to cruel and unusual punishment:** In further violation of the Eighth Amendment, the DOC is responsible for cruel prisoner punishments for minor infractions of rules.
- **Decent living conditions:** Georgia prisoners are confined in overcrowded, substandard conditions, with little heat in winter and oppressive heat in summer.
- **Nutritional meals:** Vegetables and fruit are in short supply in DOC facilities while starches and fatty foods are plentiful.
- **Vocational and self-improvement opportunities:** The DOC has stripped its facilities of all opportunities for skills training, self-improvement and proper exercise.
- **Access to families:** The DOC has disconnected thousands of prisoners from their families by imposing excessive telephone charges and innumerable barriers to visitation.
- **Just parole decisions:** The Parole Board capriciously and regularly denies parole to the majority of prisoners despite evidence of eligibility.

The conditions that have caused these men to take such a courageous action are duplicated in prisons and jails across the U.S. News about their historic strike has been censored with next to no coverage throughout Georgia. The New York Times did print information about the strike following calls by prisoners to the newspaper (Dec. 12).

Solidarity is needed to ensure the safety of the prisoners and the improvement of their conditions. Calls to the following Georgia prisons are encouraged, demanding no retaliation or reprisals and full compliance with the prisoners' demands.

Macon State Prison 978-472-3900
 Hays State Prison 706-857-0400
 Telfair State Prison 229-868-7721
 Baldwin State Prison 478-445-5218
 Valdosta State Prison 229-333-7900
 Smith State Prison 912-654-5000

Sources for this article also include the Black Agenda Report and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The strike continues as of Dec. 14.

To sign a petition of support, go to www.iacenter.org and look in the Action Alerts & Report-Backs section.

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