

July 14, 2011

Dear Friend,

We hope this letter finds you as well as can be expected. We are doing a mailing to all of our friends in California prisons because of recent developments in many prisons across the state taking action to assert their humanity. We have to write this letter in a way that is not very direct, but shares as much information as possible with you. Please bear with us.

You may be more aware of details concerning prisoners across the state supporting each other in a brave and courageous action right now. If you have information you think we should know, please contact us. On July 1st, 2011, prisoners in the Secure Housing Unit in Pelican Bay State Prison began refusing food indefinitely in response to conditions that have been characterized by the United Nations as "inhumane and degrading". Since people have begun this action, they have been joined by thousands of people in at least a third of the state's prisons. This support is part of a long international history of resistance to the use of prisons as a solution to social, economic, and political problems, with prisoner-led struggles in both Georgia (December 2010) and Youngstown, OH (January 2011) being the most recent examples.

The prisoners in Pelican Bay SHU issued a statement with five core demands that would have to be met before this action ends. The first demand is an end to group punishment and administrative abuse. The second demand is to abolish the debriefing policy, and modify active/inactive gang status criteria ("debriefing," meaning offering up information about fellow prisoners particularly in regard to gang status, which is often demanded in return for better food or even release from the SHU). The third demand is to comply with Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons 2006 recommendations regarding an end to long-term solitary confinement. The fourth demand is to provide adequate and nutritious food. The fifth demand is to expand and provide constructive programming and privileges for indefinite SHU status inmates.

Prisoners in Pelican Bay say: "The purpose of [this action] is to combat both the Ad-Seg/SHU psychological and physical torture, as well as the justifications used of support treatment of the type that leads to prisoners being subjected to a civil death. Those subjected to indeterminate SHU programs are neglected and deprived of the basic human necessities while withering away in a very isolated and hostile environment."

As you probably know, the Security Housing Unit (SHU) is a prison-within-a-prison. SHU prisoners are kept in windowless, 6 by 10 foot cells, 23½ hours a day, for years at a time and conditions in American SHUs are routinely the target of international human rights campaigns. The California Department of Corrections operates four Security Housing Units in its system: Pelican Bay, Corcoran, California Correctional Institution, and Valley State Prison for Women.

Who is supporting the prisoners on the outside? When the prisoners at Pelican Bay coordinated this action, they built into their organizing a call for the creation of a coalition outside the prison walls with specific asks around media attention, actions and other kinds of support. The coalition is made up of representatives from Bay Area organizations including Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, All of Us or None, Campaign to End the Death Penalty, California Prison Focus, Prison Activist Resource Center, Critical Resistance, Kersplebedeb, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Revolution Newspaper, American Friends Service Committee, BarNone Arcata, and a number of individuals throughout the United States and Canada committed to amplifying the voices of prisoners.

Just a few days ago, the coalition received an urgent update from medical staff at Pelican Bay State Prison that the health of at least 200 people in the SHU is rapidly worsening. A source with access to the current medical conditions who prefers to be unnamed reported:

*"All of the medical staff has been ordered to work overtime to follow and treat the hunger strikers. Some [strikers] are in renal failure and have been unable to make urine for three days. Some are having measured blood sugars in the 30 range, which can be fatal if not treated. The staff has taken them to the [prison hospital] and given them intravenous glucose when allowed by the prisoners. A few have tried to sip water but are so sick that they are vomiting it back up."*

SHU prisoners at Pelican Bay have said that they are willing to risk their lives and will continue to refuse food until their demands are met. Prisoners across CA continue to refuse food in solidarity with the prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU. The CDCR continues to refuse to negotiate.

This past weekend, families and friends brought encouragement and support to their loved ones during weekend visits at prisons across the state, witnessing the toll that this brave action is taking on their bodies. Families have

said their loved ones are extremely pale, shaking and have already lost 20-30 pounds. Some families of prisoners who have only been drinking water for 14 days now witnessed their loved ones faint or go into diabetic shock in visiting rooms over the weekend. It is also important to note that prisoners are facing an even higher risk of dehydration and heatstroke inside SHUs in the Central Valley where temperatures can reach well over 110°F. We know that more than 200 prisoners continue to support this action at Calipatria in this heat.

Many doctors outside of prison, some of whom have experience working with prisoners, have explained to us that adequate hydration is paramount to preventing fatal starvation. The fact that the prisoners are showing symptoms of such extreme dehydration shows that they are quickly approaching a medical crisis. Clearly the prisoners are in dire need of adequate food and hydration. The only way to prevent people from dying right now is for the CDCR to negotiate with the prisoners with the outside mediation team that the prisoners have approved of.

People locked up across the state have been telling their friends and families about the tactics prison officials have been using to break this courageous action. Many prisoners have said that medications are being denied to prisoners on hunger strike.

Prisoners have reported that guards in at least Pelican Bay General Population and Calipatria State Prison have been calling throughout blocks and units: "The [action] is over! The 5 demands have been met!" which is not true. According to family members of prisoners at Calipatria, participation at Calipatria was huge—at least 1,500 prisoners throughout that prison alone joined—until the guards spread rumors of the protest ending. 200+ prisoners at Calipatria continue to refuse food, however.

The CDCR released an estimate of 6,600 prisoners participating in the protest during the 4th of July weekend. When they subsequently declared the numbers dropped to approximately 2,100 in the following days. They, of course, failed to mention how and why that happened. The decline in numbers in no way demonstrates a lack of support or dedication to this struggle from the prisoners, but rather illustrates how eager the CDCR is to make this issue go away quickly and quietly. In the face of all of this, many prisoners have maintained their resilience & are committed to participating in this action as a means to assert their humanity.

Family, friends, community members, and organizations have come together across the country—and across the world—to show support and solidarity from outside with prisoners at Pelican Bay and throughout California. Families and community organizations like the Prison Moratorium Project continue to rally support outside of protesting prisons like Corcoran, sharing information and trying to visit their loved ones as regularly as possible. A video made by supporters detailing the 5 core demands has received well over 3,350 views to date. Thousands have organized and participated in rallies, press conferences, film screenings, pickets, vigils, solidarity fasts, and other actions in more than 15 cities including Harlem, NY, Los Angeles, CA, Chicago, IL, Tucson, AZ, Perth, Australia, Toronto, Ontario and Montreal, Quebec in Canada. We see our support connected to the struggle for affordable housing, more jobs, better education, relevant and empowering programs for youth and formerly incarcerated people, sustainable health-care, and overall community self-determination. We understand our support to be connected to fighting against the devastation of communities from which so many of our friends and loved ones are rounded up and imprisoned.

Supporters outside know the action reached 6,600 prisoners across at least 13 prisons, including Pelican Bay (SHU & General Population), California Correctional Institute, Centinela, Folsom, Corcoran, San Quentin, Calipatria, and RJ Donovan. We are trying to find out more about other prisons that have been participating. If you have been participating, or know information that supporters should be aware of, please contact us as soon as possible. If you do write to us, please write "Attn: Whitney" on the envelope. Support for this action is at a crucial point where we need to pressure the CDCR to negotiate with the prisoners immediately. Tell your friends & family to call the CDCR and urge them to negotiate now. Also tell them to call their legislators and urge them to make sure the CDCR negotiates with the prisoners in good faith.

Write to us to find out more; we will be sending updates to you each week as long as this action continues. Please tell your friends & family on the outside to visit our website to get more information about the protest, the demands, conditions inside the SHU, notices about upcoming events, and action items <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com> or call us at 510-444-0484. We accept collect calls.

Again, we hope this letter finds you as well as can be expected, and to hear from you soon.

In Solidarity,

On behalf of Critical Resistance