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ANALYSIS

What's Really Happening With the National Prison Strike?

Action is limited so far, but organizers are cheering the media attention.

By NICOLE LEWIS

For several weeks, a group of inmates has been calling for a national prison strike to protest what organizers say are inhumane conditions inside the nation's prisons. Using contraband cell phones and with the help of outside volunteers, inmates in South Carolina and Alabama spread word of the strike on Facebook and Twitter and published their demands online and in prison newsletters. Organizers, both in and outside of the prison, say they encouraged inmates across the country to refuse to work or spend money to curtail the profits they say prisons and private companies make off their incarceration.

In the days leading up to the proposed start on Aug. 21, representatives for the strike said they anticipated demonstrations by inmates in as many as 17 states. But four days into the declared protests, they say they can confirm actions in only a handful of states. Organizers say they have confirmed accounts of participation at Northwest Detention Center, an immigration detention center in Washington; Folsom State Prison in California; McCormick Correctional Institution in South Carolina; and Toledo Correctional Institution in Ohio. They have relied mostly on the word of families and volunteers who have been in touch with participating inmates.

Yet despite the strike's limited scope and the difficulty of corroborating the organizers' claims, national and local media have covered the strike in earnest, some calling it "the largest national prison strike in US history."

History shows that political actions by prisoners have had mixed results at best. Some prison reform advocates say that fear of reprisals coupled with the difficulty of communicating between prisons makes widespread action unlikely. Still, some say the media attention is a small victory in that it has brought the issue of inhumane prison conditions to a wider audience.

Here is a guide to how the strike garnered national media attention and what it tells us about both the aims of the organizers and the challenges of reporting on America's prison system.

How did inmates organize it?

Initially, there were talks among Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS), a self-organized collection of anonymous activists incarcerated throughout the United States, and other activist inmates to plan a strike in 2019. But they decided to move up the timeline after seven inmates died during a riot in April at Lee Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in South Carolina. Members of JLS say the violence was a direct result of crowding at the prison, coupled with the practice of housing inmates from rival gangs on the same tier.

It isn't the first time JLS has called for a strike. In 2016, a group of incarcerated activists known as the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) called for a work stoppage on Sept. 9 to protest the slavery exception in the Thirteenth Amendment, which bans unpaid servitude in the United States except as punishment for a crime. That year's strike call was supported by JLS and by the International Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), a socialist labor union that aims to unionize prison laborers. Committee members amplified the strike news on Twitter and Facebook, and wrote about it their prison newsletter.

To spread the word in 2018, JLS reached out to a woman named Amani Sawari. Though Sawari is not a veteran political organizer, she has crafted a campaign that put this effort in the national media spotlight. She works for her church during the week and does hair on weekends, but for a year she wrote for a prison abolition newsletter called, "I Am We," that is circulated in some prisons. She says JLS asked for her help in posting their demands online and serving as the strike's official spokesperson.

A JLS member also reached out to an inmate who goes by the pseudonym, "Swift Justice," who has been imprisoned in Alabama for more than 20 years. Justice frequently writes for the San Francisco

Bayview, a black nationalist newspaper that also makes its rounds among inmates. He communicates with the outside world using a contraband cell phone.

Justice supported the proposed strike plan, and promoted it on his Facebook and Twitter accounts. He also says he reached out to a few contacts at other prisons that he has made through his advocacy work.

"It went big real quick," he said.

IWOC and Sawari coordinated solidarity efforts outside. They have garnered more than 150 endorsements for the strike, many from local chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other left-leaning organizations. And they have organized scores of demonstrations outside of prison facilities nationwide, which have been documented on the prison strike website. Members of IWOC and the endorsing organizations continued to spread word of the strike on Twitter, using the hashtag #August21.

Exactly how many inmates heard the call for the strike is impossible to say. But on Aug. 21, the anniversary of the killing of political activist George Jackson in a California prison in 1971, the idea of a large scale prison strike had already made its way from prison periodicals and leftist blogs into the mainstream media.

What has the media coverage focused on?

On the first day of the strike, Sawari appeared on Democracy Now alongside an IWOC representative to discuss the strike's goals with Amy Goodman. NPR and its affiliates reported the strike on several of their news programs. The Washington Post wrote about the strike and published a companion opinion piece by criminal justice columnist Radley Balko. The Guardian, New York Magazine, Vox.com, Al Jazeera, BBC World News, Mother Jones, and many other outlets have all covered the strike and its goals.

Most have focused on demands for prisons to eliminate what the organizers call "modern day slavery," in which inmates perform labor for little or no pay. Nick Tabor at New York Magazine declared that the strike "will likely turn out to be the largest and most ambitious prison strike in U.S. history, eclipsing even the 2016 protest in which 24,000 prisoners participated."

The number of prisoners who struck in 2016 is unconfirmed. And the 2018 numbers so far do not suggest the strike will be larger and more robust than past efforts. Still, organizers note that the media coverage has been dramatically different this year.

"We were not expecting this," said Krystal Rountree, the director of iamWE Prisoner Advocacy Network, who is a spokesperson for JLS. "We have had so much media that we can not handle all the requests. In 2016 it was way different. I was on Al Jazeera two days ago talking about the strike and the reporter asked me if the strike was a success. I said 'are you kidding me, I am on Al Jazeera talking about something the prisoners have brought out.' "

Some outlets simply reposted unchecked information put out by the outside strike organizers, including details about how many prisons are participating. Others balanced the organizers' accounts of the strike with official statements by state corrections departments.

The Marshall Project reached out to several corrections departments as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons. So far, officials in South Carolina and Florida, as well as the BOP, say they have no confirmed work-stoppages, contradicting the organizers' claims. Officials in Washington, Ohio, California, and North Carolina have yet to respond to requests for comment. When questioned about the opposing narratives, Sawari responded, "many inmates are taking part in ways that might be less visible, such as refusing to spend money in the prison commissary."

So was the strike simply a PR stunt?

No, organizers say, but generating media attention was a main goal.

"The long term goal is really about bringing awareness to the issues," said Rountree. "No one is deluded and thinks that after Sept. 9 we are going to have all these changes to the system."

Criminal justice reform advocates point out that inmates can't freely choose how to spend their time, and that the fear of retribution by prison officials undermines any attempt at mass demonstration.

"What is far more significant, is that thanks to cell phones and prison newspapers like the Bayview and Prison Legal News, people responded with a coordinated articulation of what the problem is

and what the demands are," said Heather Ann Thompson, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning-book about the Attica uprising, "Blood in the Water." "Whether or not they are able to stage a walkout because of fear of reprisals doesn't matter as much as the public recognition of how bad the nation's prisons really are."

So what are the takeaways?

First and foremost, the call for a strike and the subsequent media attention underscores how difficult it is to learn or understand what is happening in prisons across the country.

"Prisons are black boxes," said David Fathi, who serves at the director of the ACLU prison project. "There is very little information available about what happens in prisons."

The United States does not have a regulatory body like the ones in Canada or France that are tasked with monitoring prison conditions and reporting information to the public. Without the oversight, lawsuits filed by inmates are one of the main ways details about prison conditions become public knowledge.

Second, many of the organizers of the strike say that they are just getting started, and that incarcerated people should lead in the movement for criminal justice reform. Organizers noted plans for upcoming campaigns to restore voting rights to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and are continuing to write, tweet, and build coalitions both inside and outside of prisons. They are encouraged by the support they have received from organizations like the ACLU and Vera Institute for Justice.

And finally, some advocates say the proposed strike and the resulting media coverage could mark a crucial turning point in criminal justice reform efforts. Nick Turner, president of Vera, likened the strike and the media attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. Though police shootings were nothing new, he said, it was video footage of police killing unarmed black men and women that ignited public outrage. In turn, the public outrage put pressure on public officials which ultimately led to the White House commissioning a Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

"But no one could possibly point out an analogy within the prison system that would allow the same thing to happen," he said. "The media calling attention to the strike, making sure the story is

being told about what it is like to live in a prison and see the dehumanization, actually allows people to come to a conclusion about whether their own assumptions about prisoners are right or wrong." ###