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COMMENTARY

A Former Warden's View on Prison Strikes

"An inmate is there as punishment, not for punishment."

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This week, a prison strike has been called for inmates at 17 facilities nationwide in response to an April riot at South Carolina's Lee Correctional Institution, where seven inmates were killed while prison staff failed to immediately respond.

Among 10 demands stated by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, one of several groups endorsing the strike, are improvements in prison conditions, prevailing wages for incarcerated workers, voting rights for all confined citizens and an end to the racial overcharging, over-sentencing and parole denials to people of color. The strike is planned to continue until Sept. 9, the 47th anniversary of the Attica prison uprising.

For a view into the nature of prison strikes and how authorities respond to them, The Marshall Project spoke with Cameron Lindsay, a retired warden of three federal facilities: the Federal Correctional Institution in Lompoc, California, the U.S. Penitentiary in Canaan, Pennsylvania, and the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. Lindsay also ran privatized institutions in Philipsburg and Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, and has taught at several colleges. He now serves as a consultant and an expert witness in corrections cases. He spoke with Interim Commentary Editor Robin Washington. The views expressed are his own, and this interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: Have you experienced any strikes, hunger strikes, work strikes or other organized prisoner actions?

A: I've seen pretty much all of that over the course of 29 years. The most widespread strike that I ever saw that comes close to what I'm hearing about this week was in federal prisons in October of 1995. It was mostly African American inmates. They were protesting the vast disparity of sentencing laws between powder cocaine and crack cocaine.

It was the first and only time in history that (the federal prison system) announced a nationwide lockdown. The lockdown of a facility is something to be taken very, very seriously. It's complicated and fraught with all kinds of problems. It's not a decision to be made lightly.

I can promise you if these inmates do engage in some kind of systematic strikes that wardens will lock down the facilities.

Q: What have you experienced specifically?

In 1995, I worked at the Federal Correctional Institution, McKean, in Bradford, Pennsylvania. It started as a work strike. The first inmate called to duty is at 4 a.m. What we experienced on Oct. 24, 1995, was the inmate crew refused to go to work. There were some that wanted to but they didn't because they feared retaliation. I have had others on a less severe scale. We had a very brief food strike at the (U.S. Penitentiary) in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. It was small and isolated.

There are food strikes, work strikes, then all-out disturbances and/or riots, depending on the severity. You might have food service inmates who are upset about wages or the way they are being treated by staff. A work strike is the most common way — inappropriate, I might add — that inmates will demonstrate in an attempt to get the attention of the staff. Typically when it happens, the warden will lock down the facility until they have a chance to gauge what really is going on. They'll gather intelligence, talk to informants, listen to telephone calls, until they can figure out what is going on out there. They may even reach out to certain inmate leaders. Usually, the next thing they do is remove the quote-unquote "agitators" from the general population and put them in isolation. Then they interview every single inmate so that nobody feels singled out.

Q: Does a strike ever work? From the inmate point of view?

In the short term, no. They don't work because the ringleaders tend to get locked up, and after they are isolated they're transferred to other facilities.

In the long term, they may be able to effect some change because they do get some media and political attention. In 1987 in Oakdale, Louisiana, and Atlanta, there were simultaneous riots. There was a specific cadre of Cuban inmates from the Mariel boatlift. Our government decided to repatriate them to Cuba. They did not want to go, so they raised hell in their facility. In the long term, their actions did lead to some changes.

Q: The cocaine sentencing disparities protested in the 1995 strike also were eventually changed.

There you go.

Q: Do prisons have a strike task force of some kind, with COs appointed to investigate?

That's a tough answer. People talk about the "criminal justice system," but it's not one system, it's a whole bunch of systems. There are local corrections, state corrections and federal corrections. There's very rarely a coordinated effort on a widespread basis for a type of strike.

In the federal Bureau of Prisons, they are really good about gathering and cultivating intelligence. The staffers should be able to predict when one of these happens. Conversely, if you have a correctional facility that is not well operated and they don't know that something is going to go down, when it does, they're not going to know how to react.

I'm biased toward federal prisons. Since I retired, I've worked as an expert witness in the field. I thought I had seen everything. Fact of that matter is I didn't know anything. My perspective was federal. I've visited rural jails, detention facilities, smaller facilities. I am just bowled over by the lack of professionalism. I would never have thought some of these things are still going on in the correctional system. Our country as a whole has a long, long way to go before we can say we're running prisons the right way.

Q: If this strike happens, how would inmates at different facilities communicate with each other? I know there are family members and contraband cell phones, but even on the outside, trying to get the same instructions to people across the country doesn't always work.

It still would take a lot of coordination. In 1995 there was an organization, Families Against Mandatory Minimums. They had a lot to do with the communication and coordination of getting information through the federal prison system.

It could happen a number of ways. It could happen through attorneys. There are illicit ways; cell phones. All those things together add up to one unusual event we're about to experience.

Look at the incident in April this year at the Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina. There were seven inmates that were murdered in this horrific melee.

I'm just so amazed at the pervasive ignorance in the world of corrections. Here you have seven inmates murdered and they're talking about widespread contraband cell phones, drugs, inmates fighting over territory in the yard. These seven inmates are killed in this horrendous riot, and it's alleged that staff waited for hours and let the inmates do their thing.

This is one of the reasons that led up to this strike. It's the way that inmates are being treated. As warden of five different correctional facilities, I always told my staff that inmates are incarcerated as punishment, not for punishment. That's where correctional administration, correctional staff miss the mark at times. An inmate is there as punishment, not for punishment. That's what we have to get straight with all of this. |||