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California prisoners assert their humanity with hunger strike

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jul. 27, 2011 NCR Today

Late last week, a group of California prisoners, many of them kept in maximum isolation units, ended their extraordinary 20-day hunger strike waged in protest of the cruel conditions of their confinement.

The strike, which began July 1 among inmates in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison, transcended the gang and geographic affiliations that typically divide prisoners. At its height, as many as 6600 prisoners from 13 California prisons were refusing food, leading some to describe the mass fasting as the largest inmate uprising since the 1971 revolt at Attica Prison in upstate New York.

The five core demands of the striking prisoners as listed on the Web site for California Prison Focus [1], an inmate advocate organization, are as follows:

> "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.
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> 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 long-term 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.
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> 3. Comply with the recommendations of the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons (2006) regarding an end to long-term 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.
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> 4. Provide adequate 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.
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> 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)."

According to prison advocates, inmates at Pelican Bay ended their hunger strike July 21 in exchange for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) agreeing to a major policy review of SHU housing conditions, gang validation process, and the debriefing process. The CDCR claims the only items conceded were permission to have wall calendars, watch caps in winter, and proctored exams for prisoners who have paid.

It is not clear whether all the prisoners involved in the strike have resumed eating. On Friday, July 22, the *Los Angeles Times* reported [2] more than 500 prisoners in three different California prisons were still refusing food.

The use of long-term solitary confinement, considered by many to be a form of torture, has become a disciplinary measure of first rather than last resort throughout the U.S. prison system. Inmates are locked up for 22 and a half hours a day in 8 by 10 foot cells. They are denied all communal activities including the consolation of worshipping with others. Meals are passed through a slot in the door, as is the Eucharist. Exercise is done alone in a cage.

"Any prisoner, regardless of his original crime, can end up in solitary. And he can be placed there for a wide variety of reasons, some of them quite heinous and some fairly innocuous," write Jean Casella and James Ridgeway in a July 21 article published [3] in the San Francisco Bay View, a national black newspaper.

Casella and Ridgeway co-edit *SolitaryWatch* [4], a Web site aimed at raising public awareness of the use of solitary confinement and other forms of torture in U.S. prisons. Their article examines the capriciousness behind the decision to isolate an inmate. Violent behavior can land a prisoner in solitary but so too can a tattoo, "acts of disobedience," or the perceived threat to commit a disruption or breach of security.

According to one report, 50 percent of the inmates confined in SHUs are there because of alleged gang affiliation. Their only way out is to "debrief." The process, which inmates call "snitch, parole or die," has created a cruel revolving door. Prisoners get out of isolation by ratting on prisoners who are then put in isolation.

"The moral queasiness that we must feel about this method of extracting information from those in our clutches has all but disappeared these days, thanks to the national shame of 'enhanced interrogation techniques' at Guantánamo," writes English professor Colin Dayan in *The New York Times* [5] published July 18. "Those in isolation can get out by naming names, but if they do so they will likely be killed when returned to a normal facility. To 'debrief' is to be targeted for death by gang members, so the prisoners are moved to 'protective custody' -- that is, another form of solitary confinement."

The French philosopher Albert Camus once said, and this is a loose paraphrase, that if you want to determine the health of a society, visit its prisons. By this standard, we in America are faring very poorly. In tolerating the torture of foreign-born detainees, we have inured ourselves to the cruelties within our domestic prison system, cruelties that are intended to completely subjugate human beings and render them invisible to the outside world. What other reasons are there for isolating a person for *years*?

How remarkable then that the men in Pelican Bay's SHU, with the help of their supporters, have been able to assert what we, as a society, have forgotten: Inmates are human beings. Their hunger strike helped cast a light on prison conditions in this country. Much, much more needs to be done. But the strike marks an important beginning.

For more on the strike and efforts at prison reform in California, visit:
http://www.prisons.org/hungerstrike.htm [1]

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[1] http://www.prisons.org/hungerstrike.htm
[2] http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/california-politics/2011/07/california-prison-hunger-strike.html
[3] http://sfbayview.com/2011/who-are-the-hunger-strikers-how-prisoners-land-in-pelican-bay%E2%80%99s-shu/
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