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Updates for May 5th

21 Apr - Bureau of Prisons Reverses Coronavirus Home Confinement Policy

On April 20th, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) abruptly changed its policy for which prisoners are eligible for early release into home confinement because of the threat of COVID-19, advocates and family members of inmates say, crushing the hopes of some prisoners who had already been moved into pre-release quarantine.

MORE:

by C.J. Ciaramella (*Reason*)

According to multiple accounts from family members and the criminal justice advocacy group FAMM, the BOP informed inmates on Monday that it would not be waiving a requirement that inmates serve 50 percent of their sentence before they can become eligible for home confinement, despite earlier indications that it would.

It's unclear how many inmates who were approved for early release were disqualified. The BOP did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"The BOP is playing with people's lives," Kevin Ring, president of FAMM, said in a statement. "It's nothing short of cruel to tell hundreds of people they are going home, notifying their families and quarantining them for days, only to change your mind afterward."

Attorney General William Barr issued a directive on March 26 expanding compassionate release and home confinement transfers of elderly and at-risk inmates to mitigate potentially deadly COVID-19 outbreaks. *Politico* reported on April 9 that the BOP quietly expanded the directive and waived the 50 percent requirement as the virus spread through several federal prisons.

Inmates who are approved for early release are put into quarantine for two weeks. However, Ring tweeted yesterday that family members of inmates traveled to FCC Coleman, a federal prison complex in Florida, expecting to pick up their incarcerated loved ones, only to be told the policy had been changed.

Reason received a message yesterday from a family member of a man incarcerated at FCI Elkton, a federal prison in Ohio that has been hit particularly hard by the virus.

"Last week, my Dad was told that he would be going to home confinement based on AG Barr's memo," the family member wrote. "They made him sign numerous documents on multiple occasions. Today, they told him that he was denied for home confinement because he hasn't served 50% of his sentence yet. The 50% threshold is explicitly NOT a criteria, yet they have still done this to him. Not to mention the sentence in the first place is way above the guidelines. What they are doing to people is cruel and unusual. It isn't right."

Politico received a similar email:

"They just posted a new BOP Bulletin a few minutes ago, reversing the Barr decision and requiring that those released to home confinement must have served 50% of their sentence," Stephen Donaldson, son of an inmate at a prison in Georgia, wrote in an email to POLITICO. "I was hoping to have my father home. He tells me a number of other inmates had started the quarantine pre release and then were told of the reversal."

The notifications appear to have gone out throughout the federal prison system.

Yesterday Judge Alison Nathan of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York called the BOP's quarantine policies "illogical" and "Kafkaesque" and said they put inmates at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

According to the BOP's most recent numbers, there are 497 federal inmates and 319 staff infected with the virus. So far, 22 inmates have died from COVID-19 complications. There are roughly 20,000 federal inmates over the age of 55.

FAMM sent a letter today to BOP Director Michael Caraval today requesting more information and transparency from the agency.

"Tens of thousands of families across the country are deeply and understandably frightened for the health and safety of their incarcerated loved ones," Ring wrote. "The people inside BOP's facilities are confused, frightened, and vulnerable. They deserve maximum transparency from the BOP."

21 Apr - Despite COVID-19 Risks, Justice Department Opposes Compassionate Release For Reality Winner

The Justice Department opposes the release of NSA whistleblower Reality Winner from Federal Medical Center Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas. She requested compassionate release from prison on April 10.

MORE:

by Kevin Gosztola (*Shadowproof*)

U.S. Attorney Bobby Christine argues Winner has not alleged a medical condition that qualifies her for compassionate release.

"Winner's bulimia and depression were the basis of [the federal court's] recommendation, which BOP accepted, to commit her to Carswell FMC. They are not, though, among the physical or mental conditions so serious that they qualify for compassionate release."

"She has not provided any documentation demonstrating that her specific medical conditions, medications, and conditions of confinement at Carswell FMC are inclined to uniquely and adversely affect her to the point of justifying early release," Christine added.

The Justice Department further maintains Winner has not presented evidence that Carswell is unable to adequately care for her. "As a federal medical center, Carswell is particularly well situated to treat Winner, should she become exposed."

Billie Winner-Davis, the mother of NSA whistleblower Reality Winner does not believe the Bureau of Prisons is accurately reporting what is going on at the facility, where her daughter is imprisoned.

"I wonder how many staff and inmates have even been tested," Billie Winner-Davis said. "I just cannot understand why my daughter cannot be released at this time to save her from possible sickness and death."

When Winner urged a federal court in Georgia to protect her from the spread of the coronavirus, she asked that the court release her to home confinement with family. She also asked the court to quickly make a decision on the request, but the court declined to speed up the process.

Her mother reacted, “The court’s ruling that this is not a situation that warrants an expedited response is cruel in this pandemic situation, and [it] is also careless. I pray that nothing happens to my daughter while she is trapped inside, but if it does, I know who I will blame.”

Winner has served more than 34 months of a 63-month sentence at Federal Medical Center Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas.

In 2018, she pled guilty to one count of violating the Espionage Act when she disclosed an NSA report to *The Intercept*. She believed the analyst report contained evidence of Russian hackers targeting United States voter registration systems during the 2016 election.

Carswell holds around 1,600 prisoners. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) website says there are only two inmates confirmed to have the coronavirus, but that does not match up with what inmates within the facility have told reporters.

Shadowproof asked administrators at Carswell to confirm whether it is true that there are only two inmates with the coronavirus at the facility, and none have died. The inquiry for basic information was forwarded to the Bureau of Prisons, but days later, the BOP’s public information officer has not responded.

Winner’s attorneys maintain the First Step Act allows prisoners to petition courts for compassionate release “removing the BOP’s exclusive ‘gatekeeper’ role.” They invoke the 2018 law in their motion to the court.

“Reality asks this court to commute her sentence to home confinement so that she may carry out the balance of her term under the care of her family, and avoid the fate of so many others currently incarcerated in federal prison facilities — including FMC Carswell — that have contracted this contagious and deadly virus,” her attorneys wrote.

According to Winner’s legal team, the COVID-19 outbreak and “her history of respiratory illnesses as well as eating disorders place her at high risk should she contract the disease.” These circumstances present “extraordinary and compelling reasons” to reduce her sentence.

“Reality’s routines allow her to cope and hold the things she is unable to control together, which is monumental to her survival in any environment where she controls nothing, like prison,” her attorneys state. “The COVID-19 outbreak only adds another element to her life she cannot control and threatens her overall health.

“When paired with an unknown illness, Reality’s illness could spiral from a daily struggle that merely makes it difficult to get out of bed in the morning to a fully compromising situation from which she may never recover.”

The “modified lockdown” at Carswell, without exercise routines, imperils Winner’s health, according to her attorneys.

“Reality’s depleted mental and physical states—with no way to exercise any coping mechanism for the stress of her own underlying conditions and now the added stress of battling a novel virus present in her facility—make her particularly susceptible to COVID-19.”

Winner-Davis told *Shadowproof* she has reached out to Carswell prison staff about her concerns. “They have been positively responsive, which is a good thing.”

“I have seen a decline in her mental health. She is scared all of the time, and the complete lockdown has exacerbated her anxiety to an unmanageable level. She has asked for medication at this point but was denied as she will need to see the doctor, something that will take time.”

“She is cleaning non-stop and has exhibited self-destructive behaviors that have me extremely worried about her mental health,” Winner-Davis added.

Winner’s attorneys contend, “The best chance Reality has to weather this pandemic is to be released and be permitted to live with her family in rural Texas, where she can appropriately ‘shelter in place’ and avoid interacting with others.”

They believe Attorney General William Barr’s March 26 memo on prioritizing “home confinement as appropriate in response to the COVID-19 pandemic” directly applies to cases like Winner’s case.

Since Barr’s memo, the Bureau of Prisons says it has moved 566 inmates into home confinement.

Even if Winner was designated for home confinement, the BOP could keep her in a “14-day quarantine” before allowing her family to take her home.

Federal Judge Alison Nathan called the BOP’s approach “Kafkaesque” and dangerous in a separate case involving Gerard Separta, who is incarcerated at Federal Correctional Institution Butner in North Carolina and was cleared for compassionate release.

“The BOP has determined that Mr. Separta must remain in custody during the peak of the pandemic for what it labels a ‘14-day quarantine,’ but his current confinement is neither a quarantine nor limited to 14 days. In fact, following inquiries from this court, the government revealed that Mr. Separta is housed with many other people in conditions that will inevitably permit the virus to spread,” Nathan declared.

“As of April 14, the BOP determined that Mr. Separta’s 14-day-clock must start over because one of the many people he is now housed with tested positive. Under the BOP’s policy, if any one of the individuals in Mr. Separta’s unit, most of whom have also been approved for home confinement, tests positive, the 14-day waiting period for all inmates in the unit starts anew [emphasis in quote].”

The BOP refuses to allow Separta to “self-quarantine in his residence for 14 days,” but fortunately, in Separta’s case, Nathan ordered the BOP to release him from custody immediately.

KERA, a Dallas radio station, spoke with an inmate at Carswell named Mendy Forbes. She was put into solitary confinement after speaking to the press. She spoke to KERA because she was afraid the facility was not taking proper action to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Officers moved between a unit across the hall from her unit that was put “under quarantine because of a suspected coronavirus case.”

Before she was moved, Forbes was housed in a unit with 250 women. There are only 120 chairs. “They sleep four to a cell and less than three feet apart. Everyone’s expected to wear the same disposable mask every day. The phones are in pretty heavy use, but Forbes hasn’t seen anyone sanitize them,” according to KERA.

Forbes is a “lawyer by training” and was helping elderly women, pregnant women, and women with chronic health conditions, file motions for release. They make up the bulk of the population at Carswell.

“We have people who should’ve already been gone. I have one lady who’s close to 70-years-old on a pacemaker where the case manager screwed up her paperwork months ago who should’ve been gone and she’s still sitting here,” Forbes shared.

Winner’s legal team asserts releasing her to home confinement will not create any disparity in sentencing. In fact, it may correct a disparity.

“Reality has served the majority of her mandatory sentence and is approximately two years away from release. Granting the motion would resolve the sentence disparities between her and similarly situated defendants because her prison term was more than many prior Espionage Act prosecutions,” her attorneys conclude.

April 24th - Judge Rejects Reality Winner’s Request For Release As COVID-19 Spreads At Women’s Prison

by Kevin Gosztola (*Shadowproof*)

Federal Judge Randal Hall rejected NSA whistleblower Reality Winner’s request for release from a federal prison. Hall contended Winner is in a “medical prison, which is presumably better equipped than most to deal with any onset of COVID-19 in its inmates.”

“Winner has not carried the burden of demonstrating that her specific medical conditions under the particular conditions of confinement at [Federal Medical Center] Carswell place her at a risk substantial enough to justify early release,” Hall declared.

Repeating an argument put forward by the Justice Department, which opposed her request, Hall added, “The court would be remiss not to point out Winner’s incongruous complaint that she is at greater risk because of the preventative measures undertaken by the prison in response to COVID-19.”

Billie Winner-Davis, who is Reality’s mother, reacted, “I am extremely disappointed. I am overwhelmed with fear and sadness. I pray that nothing happens to her.”

On April 10, Winner urged a federal court in Georgia to protect her from the spread of the coronavirus. She asked the court to release her to home confinement with family because she has a history of bulimia, depression, and respiratory illnesses that make her vulnerable.

Winner pled guilty in 2018 to one count of violating the Espionage Act when she disclosed an NSA report to *The Intercept*. She believed the report contained evidence that Russian hackers targeted United States voter registration systems during the 2016 election.

She has served more than 34 months of a 63-month sentence at FMC Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas.

Carswell holds around 1,600 women, who are elderly, pregnant, or have chronic health conditions. The Bureau of Prisons claims only two inmates at the facility have tested positive for the coronavirus, but that does not match up with what women within the facility have told reporters.

On April 20, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram spoke to Marie Neba, who described in early April how phones are sanitized. When she spoke to the newspaper, “no more than two feet away, other inmates were talking and sending emails. They were not wearing masks.”

The lockdown means inmates like Neba spend “22 hours a day in a nine-person cell. The beds are three feet apart. One of the women in her cell,” according to Neba, “had a fever but was not tested for coronavirus.”

Neba has stage four breast cancer and diabetes and is “full of anxiety.” Her story is one story that undermines the assertion by the Justice Department and the judge that Carswell is uniquely capable of protecting prisoners from the coronavirus because the facility is a “medical hospital.”

The local newspaper further reported, “Inmates at Carswell say the prison has not conducted mass testing. In a letter sent to Warden Michael Carr by several inmates, they asked him to release all elderly and sick nonviolent offenders to home confinement and said a single case of coronavirus could have the effect of lighting a match on a book of matches. ‘If there was ever a time to show mercy and compassion, this is it,’ they wrote.”

Hall failed to consider the history of Carswell, which in 2005 was labeled by the ACLU of Texas as a “hospital of horrors” for women prisoners. The facility enabled sexual abuse and was responsible for systematic medical neglect.

Carswell did not go on lockdown until March 31. By then, Texas averaged 300 new cases per day and 38 deaths. In fact, the first cases of coronavirus in the state were documented in the first week of March.

There was a flu outbreak at Carswell in February. Winner-Davis visited her daughter and learned the facility was not providing prisoners with “enough soap,” and they showered in freezing water because the hot water was turned off.

The Appeal published a report on Carswell on April 21. Nancy Ferneau was at Carswell for 16 years and recalled how a woman had her breast removed “because she was misdiagnosed with cancer.” Another prisoner “died in the laundry room after complaints about her pacemaker were ignored by staff.”

“Doctors do not want to see you,” Ferneau asserted. “You only get to see the actual doctor once a year. To see a physician’s assistant or a nurse, a lot of times they use a number system and by the time you get your turn you get over what’s wrong with you.”

The Justice Department maintained as it outlined their opposition to Winner’s request that the Bureau of Prisons is taking a “careful evidence-based approach that not only provides an overall strategy but also allows BOP to respond to the specific challenges faced by particular facilities and inmates.” It described five phases of an “action plan” implemented by officials, but this obscures the reality of what is unfolding at facilities like Carswell.

One prisoner, Maria, told *The Appeal*, “We live in rooms with four other women, where if one of us is standing up the others have to be on their bed or definitely out of the room. The room is maybe 8 feet by 10 feet with four beds and four lockers stacked one on top of the other.”

Nicole, another prisoner, shared, “We are 300 in one unit and four to a little room so it is inevitable that we are around each other.” And masks were given to prisoners for the first time in April, yet they reused the same mask for two week.

Winner-Davis said Winner was issued a cloth mask that was supposed to last her seven days. She does not have access to a washing machine. The most she can do to make it last for a week is wash the mask with soap in a sink.

Amy Povah runs a nonprofit organization called CAN-DO. In an interview for *The Appeal*, she said, “If priority were given to any one federal facility in this country, it should be the Carswell medical facility, where women are medically compromised and extremely vulnerable to the coronavirus.”

“As someone who served nine years in federal prison, it was rare for anyone to escape the flu during flu season. It takes off like a fire in a dry barn due to our close proximity to one another and inability to practice social distancing or have access to medications and vitamins such as zinc, fresh citrus or vegetables, et cetera” Povah added.

Moreover, the “services” provided at Carswell do not make the facility a safe place for vulnerable people like Winner. Prisons often fail to provide adequate health care, which during a pandemic may result in deadly consequences for prisoners. But the Justice Department, as well as Judge Hall, would have the public incorrectly believe Carswell can protect prisoners because it is a “medical hospital.”

To this idea that Winner is contradicting herself by arguing she is at “greater risk” due to preventative measures, both the judge and Justice Department are perpetuating ignorance. They are fully capable of assessing the lockdown measures put in place. Any assessment would conclude that the restrictions on recreation and increased time spent in cells would amount to cruel or unusual treatment under most scenarios.

If Hall and the Justice Department truly cared about the well-being of prisoners during the pandemic, they would be doing more to release prisoners like Winner. Instead, they are clinging to the same callousness that defined their opposition to granting her bail before she accepted a plea agreement.

In November 2017, Hall criminalized Winner’s experience in the Air Force and treated Winner like she was a terrorist sympathizer and suggested she was interested in “matters of the Taliban” and “researched airline flights to Kurdistan and Erbil and work visas in Afghanistan,” like she wanted to join the militant group.

Hall insisted Winner’s skills as a linguist, who knows Farsi, Dari, and Pashto, “would enable her to live and sustain herself in many Middle Eastern countries,”

U.S. Attorney Bobby Christine, who signed off on the filing that opposed Winner’s request, celebrated her 63-month sentence to prison as the “longest received by a defendant for an unauthorized disclosure of national defense information to the media.”

Both Hall and the Justice Department are deeply prejudiced against Winner for leaking classified information, and as a result of their hostility, the court’s rejection of her request may have transformed her severe sentence into a death sentence if she contracts the coronavirus at Carswell.

23 Apr - Ramsey Orta transferred to prison infirmary due to sickness

He’s scheduled to be released this summer, but Ramsey Orta’s condition behind bars could put that in jeopardy.

MORE:

by Stephon Johnson (*Amsterdam News*)

The advocate group WeCopwatch got word from Orta’s partner that he’s being denied cleaning supplies and was not allowed to wear a mask or towel over his face during an in-person hearing. The group believes that officers are purposely targeting Ramsey even though all prisoners are suffering during the COVID-19 crisis.

Orta has fallen ill and was transferred to the infirmary of the Midstate Correctional Facility in Marcy, New York, part of Oneida County.

Many believe that Orta's alleged punishment at the hands of officers is tied to his videotaping of Eric Garner's death.

"...[N]one of this, unfortunately, is surprising in the least," anti-police brutality activist Josmar Trujillo said to the *AmNews*. "Since Ramsey has been in jail—as a result of a case where I believe he was set up—he's been harassed and punished in solitary confinement. On one occasion when myself and others tried to visit him, we were turned away at the door and given no reason even after repeatedly confirming with the prison about visiting hours."

Trujillo also said he couldn't imagine the "medieval cruelty" behind closed doors considering that "prisons are a black hole of arbitrary abuse on a regular day."

Rumors have circulated that Orta might have contracted the coronavirus, but *AmNews* found nothing to confirm it. WeCopwatch, an anti-police brutality group, said that Orta called them on Tuesday and said he's awaiting COVID-19 test results. But, according to Orta, correction officers said "You aren't going to make it home, cause you want to snitch on us. You want to post about us? Suck my cock you n—— b——. Go write about that on your Facebook page."

Still, WeCopwatch members didn't want the public to run with the COVID-19 rumors.

"Two weeks ago, I (Jacob Crawford of WeCopwatch), stated that I believed officers at Midstate Correctional Facility were trying to kill Ramsey Orta before his release date in July," wrote Crawford in a blog post sent to the *AmNews*. "With the deprivation of adequate food, soap, showers, transitioning to actual death threats, Midstate is making a very compelling case that my assumptions were true."

According to Orta's fiancée, Deja, and Crawford, they're not sure if this particular development is part of a coordinated effort by the officers or just a regular sickness.

"We do not know whether he is sick, if correctional officers have made good on their threats to give him COVID-19, or if they are messing with his food," continued Crawford. "All we know is that he had a really high temperature, and that he was transferred to medical."

"It has been a nightmare I wish I could wake up from," Deja told the *AmNews*. "The dehumanizing tactics they force upon him are excruciating. I get worried every time my phone rings, because I just don't know what information I may get concerning him and his well-being. I mean he's been through it all from threats, almost being violently ill by rat poison, physically abused, and mentally abused (and then some). I'm at my wits end. No matter what's being done to help him, it isn't enough, so I feel helpless."

Orta filmed the NYPD chokehold death of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014, which was publicized around the world lead to the phrase "I Can't Breathe" becoming a slogan of the anti-police brutality movement.

In the aftermath of the video of Garner's death and the movement it sparked, Orta was arrested three times between 2014 and 2016. The first arrest occurred within weeks of Garner's death (and a day after his death was ruled a homicide) for criminal possession of a handgun he allegedly tried to give a teenager. Less than a year after that, Orta was arrested and charged with possessing and selling drugs. Months after that arrest

he was put in handcuffs again for allegedly selling the drug MDMA (known as “ecstasy”) to an undercover officer. Lab tests ruled that the MDMA was fake and led to reduced charges.

Still, Orta took a plea deal for said charges and was sent away for four years in prison in 2016. Advocates believe each arrest was a set-up by the NYPD as retaliation against Orta for filming the Garner video.

Attempts to contact the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and Acting New York State Prisons Commissioner Anthony Annucci for comment were unsuccessful.

WeCopwatch advised people to contact the offices of Annucci, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner Daniel Martuscello and New York State Gov. Andrew Cuomo demanding answers regarding Orta. They also advised people to donate directly to Orta via his PayPal at OfficialRamseyOrta@gmail.com and send books, magazines, regular mail and money orders to Midstate Correctional Facility at 9005 Old River Road, Post Office Box 2500, Marcy, New York 13403.

Trujillo believes people should help Orta for his help in generating awareness about police brutality.

“Like so many other incarcerated people, he should be given early release as soon as possible,” said Trujillo. “His actions helped spark a movement. He deserves everyone’s support.”

April 29th - Update on Ramsey Orta

With so much horrible stuff going on in this world we are relieved to be able to report that Ramsey’s Cover-19 test came back negative. The virus at Midstate has spread from 1 to 4 Corrections Officers, and now 9 Inmates. With the repeated threats from Corrections Officers, this has been a difficult few weeks for us all.

We want to thank everyone for the continued call floods. Complaints have been lodged against individual Officers involved in Ramsey’s abuse, and we have been able to forward these specific incidents to attorneys.

While we are still working tirelessly to get Ramsey free now, we are also preparing for his release.

We have online Copwatch trainings and books that we have been completing, and we have a welcome home fund we’ve been trying to fill: gofundme.com/f/ramsey-orta-welcome-home-fund

We will continue to update you on Ramsey’s current situation, as well as ways we may need support with as we prepare for his inevitable journey home.

Thank you to all the people who have stood strong with us. You all have really shown how powerful we are when we come together.

We have a lot more work to do.

27 Apr - Set Leonard Peltier Free Now

Often during powwows and other Indigenous gatherings, it is common to hear elders pray for those who are incarcerated.

MORE:

by Levi Rickert (*Native News Online*)

Elders seem to have a higher level of wisdom that makes us think about people who we may not normally think about—or even pray for—on a regular basis.

During these difficult days of the COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) pandemic, last week I began to think about Leonard Peltier being in isolation at the U.S. Penitentiary in Coleman, Florida.

He is there for his 1977 conviction in connection with a shootout with U.S. government forces, where two FBI agents and one young American Indian lost their lives on June 25, 1975 at a private residence at Oglala on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Peltier, a tribal citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, has been behind bars over 44 years. Now 75-years-old, he is said to be wearing a mask during the pandemic. He is in the vulnerable age group and in poor health. He has chronic heart problems and diabetes.

The pandemic made me think about Peltier this past week, but my favoring his release did not begin with the COVID-19 crisis.

Notable legal experts, including former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, say Peltier was not given a fair trial by the U.S. government.

“I think I can explain beyond serious doubt, that Leonard Peltier has committed no crime whatsoever. But if he had been guilty of firing a gun that killed an FBI Agent, it was in defense of not just his people but the integrity of humanity from domination and exploitation,” stated former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. “You have to remember no witness really said they saw Leonard take aim at anybody. No witness said they heard him shoot at the time he could have killed an agent. There was no evidence that he did it, except fabricated, circumstantial evidence, overwhelmingly misused, concealed and perverted.”

Even federal Judge Gerald Heaney, who presided over an appeal hearing, has said the FBI utilized improper tactics to convict Peltier. He suggests the FBI was equally responsible for the shoot-out.

Three years ago, former Iowa United States Attorney James Reynolds wrote a letter to President Obama to support clemency for Peltier. In 1977, Reynolds led the federal government’s prosecution in Peltier’s trial. Reynolds said then that President Obama should grant Peltier’s Clemency Petition “as being in the best interests of justice considering the totality of all matters involved.”

Through the years, the FBI has adamantly opposed the release of Peltier. While the deaths of their two agents at Oglala were tragic by all human standards, the deaths of hundreds of innocent American Indians who died during the 1970s, known as the “Reign of Terror” on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, are equally tragic.

While the vast majority of Americans agree the FBI serves a vital service to this nation, it should be acknowledged that the agency is operated by human beings who from time to time make mistakes. Quite clearly, there is enough evidence that the FBI made mistakes in its determination to find Peltier guilty.

Many American Indians and others around the world view Peltier as a political prisoner. Through the years, Peltier’s supporters have included the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa and Bishop Desmond Tutu, among other prominent names. For many years, the National Congress of American Indians and Amnesty International have called for Peltier’s release from prison.

Peltier’s continued imprisonment is a continued miscarriage of justice by the federal government.

On Friday, The Marshall Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system, released staggering numbers that report 9,437 prisoners across the country have tested positive for the deadly coronavirus and there have been 131 COVID-19 deaths among prisoners.

Given all of the circumstances surrounding Peltier's conviction, his prolonged imprisonment, and the potential risk he faces from the virus, he should be set free immediately.

28 Apr - Headlines by Marius Mason

We're really excited to share new poetry by Marius Mason, via Fire Ant—a collaboration between anarchist prisoners and free roaming anarchists.

MORE:

Hey ho, the world's on fire!
And it's still run by thieves and liars
Who build cities out of funeral pyres-
Hey ho, the world's on fire!

Hey ho, the Amazon
The trees who feed us oxygen
Are up in smoke and gone, gone, gone-
Hey ho, the world's on fire!

Hey ho, koala bears
Are burnt to cinders, running scared
And Exxon lawyers never cared-
Hey ho, the world's on fire!

Hey ho, as Cali burns
We share the shame, but no one learns
That this is how the whole world turns-
Hey ho, the world's on fire!

30 Apr - Building Upon the Legacies of Political Prisoners to Bring Them Home

As poor communities and communities of color continue to wade through a gauntlet of crises, it is encouraging to see movements and organizations building and seeking solidarity to wage a concerted rescue.

MORE:

It is for this reason that we must now, at this moment in our people's historical arch of resistance and struggle, extend a last ditch lifeline to our movement's political prisoners who are on their last legs and in many cases literally their last breath; and who as seniors constitute the most vulnerable among us. Our movement's political prisoners, who, despite surviving countless hostile encounters with the state's security forces, are on the verge of succumbing to old age and infirmities behind the walls and gun towers of the empire's Prison Industrial Complex.

It is also encouraging to see one of the main issues of these communities — mass incarceration — come front and center in public consciousness. To see it be recognized as the continuation of slavery, and more

folks be proud to bear the mantle of abolitionist, is heartening. We are witnessing a rising tidal wave of consciousness that has the potential of lifting society to a higher level of humanity. The need to reform or outright abolish the current legal system has never been as mainstream as it is today. Just as the abolitionist movement, the suffragist movement, the civil rights movement, and the Black Liberation/Black Power movement, were all thrusts to humanize this society, today's criminal legal reform and prison abolition movements also have the potential to make this society more humane. This "mainstreaming" of criminal justice reform is the result of the tireless efforts of activists, families, and advocates not abandoning their loved ones and communities to the beast of mass incarceration.

However, today's prison abolitionist and prison reform movement will fall woefully short of fully humanizing American society if it allows the issue of political prisoners to be perceived as a radioactive idea. Because of this reactionary and unfortunate perception among certain sectors of the reform movement, some of these political prisoners themselves have opted to be excluded from any reform or abolition campaign. They perceive themselves as radioactive to the fight. This is a sad resignation on the part of our greatest living champions of justice. This thinking has as much to do with the graciousness and self-sacrifice of our warriors behind bars as it does to the way the movement itself has allowed the idea of radioactivity, futility, and "lost cause," to influence and infect its direction and sense of justice.

In Pennsylvania, Russell Maroon Shoatz, Fred Muhammad Burton, Joseph Joe Joe Bowen and Mumia Abu-Jamal have languished in prisons for decades. They are now seniors and in poor health. Nationally, Ruchell Cinque Magee, Romaine "Chip" Fitzgerald, Sundiata Acoli, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Jalil Muntaquin, Ed Poindexter, Kamau Sadiki, Kojo Boman Sababu, Leonard Peltier, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, Veronza Bowers, and Rev. Joy Powell are among the longest interned human political prisoners in the world. These are our Nelson Mandelas. They are all not just our elders, but now our elderly. They resist the passage of time, and the effects of long-term solitary confinement, unconscionable abuses, and prison machinations, that have led to terminal illness in many of them. Not just every day that they make it through, but every breath that they take, is an act of defiance and preservation of dignity.

We believe that not seeing the movement to free political prisoners as part of the movement for criminal legal reform is partly the cause of the increased distancing and alienation of political prisoners from the criminal legal reform movement. This all has helped to increase the isolation of the movement to free political prisoners and have led to a costly loss of steam in that movement. There are also many within the mainstream criminal justice reform movement who don't want it to be associated with the radical politics that define political prisoners. This distancing and alienation of political prisoners from the criminal legal reform and abolitionist movements, which they helped birth and gave thrust and vision to, is unacceptable.

As part of the movement for prison abolition and criminal justice reform the Abolitionist Law Center and Amistad Law Project rejects the idea, whether strategic or tactical, that political prisoners are radioactive to the fight for social and criminal justice. We are committed to a strong thrust to revive the campaign to free US political prisoners. However, we believe that this thrust and campaign must also incorporate a critical collective examination of the previous struggles of the Political Prisoner movement. This would fortify an analysis of contemporary conditions for the purpose of projecting a new vision for the political prisoner movement that is integral to the abolitionist and reform movement at large. This collective examination revolves around a recommitment to Restorative and Transformative Justice centered on healing, accountability, compassion and restoration. It would also recognize the harm suffered and the enduring harm that retribution causes to the families of political prisoners, the injured family's parties, and our communities. This cycle must be broken.

The Abolitionist Law Center and Amistad Law Project are committed to supporting and helping to lead the fight for the release of Pennsylvania's political prisoners through whatever legal means available and

necessary, be it compassionate release, clemency, or pardons. We encourage prison abolitionists and prison reform movements to prioritize the cases of political prisoners. We will devote resources to the rebuilding of a Jericho Pennsylvania Chapter. Our support for Political Prisoners will not be conditioned upon guilt or innocence, nor will we prioritize or lift claims of innocence.

We believe that prioritizing the innocence of our political prisoners runs the risk of continually miring our efforts to get them released in the never ending retrying and re-litigation of their cases. Our position is that our political prisoners have served enough time and it is time to bring them home. They have served over 40 years and are in their 70's and 80's. Many are among the longest held political prisoners in the world. Statistically, they are in the age group that poses no threat to the community or society at large. In fact, their continued incarceration serves absolutely no more purpose other than endless retribution. We believe that with over 40 years served we can firmly say retribution has run its course.

We call on the prison abolition and criminal justice reform movements, and supporters of Political Prisoners, to join with us in committing to the following points:

- Organize and support efforts for compassionate release of Political Prisoners through executive clemency and/or other means available.
- Provide letters supporting clemency for political prisoners from criminal justice reform groups and restorative justice advocacy groups.
- Obtain letters supporting compassionate release from state representatives and politicians representing our communities.
- Advocate for a reconciliation and restorative justice process between Political Prisoners and the victims in the cases for which they were convicted.
- Creation of space for political prisoners in the criminal legal reform campaigns, such as the campaigns to end life without parole/death by incarceration, to release aging prisoners, to include violent cases in the equation of criminal justice reform, and to release those human beings who are most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. This would include providing space for political prisoner cases to be represented on every movement organization's agenda, including rallies and other actions.
- Establishment of a Pennsylvania chapter of Jericho to help consolidate and assist all campaigns to free the state's political prisoners.

1 May - Texas “control unit” prison: New writings and update from Xinachtli

We have an update on and two new writings by to share!

MORE:

“I will not equivocate — I will not excuse — I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.”

Fraternal, revolutionary greetings, in the true spirit of internationalism and solidarity against all forces of evil, destruction and self-destruction, hoping this one finds you, family and friends in the very best, as it leaves me, during these trying times of not only the deadly Coronavirus COVID-19, but of the same deadly white supremacist pig-germ that now occupies the White House, that is as deadly as COVID-19 for our impoverished communities, and for the imprisoned, and poor immigrants seeking a better way of life, all pushed back by this sheer imperialist arrogance and elitism of the billionaire, money-laundering pig club that has taken over the halls of political power in the U.S. of A., a clear and present danger to all of humanity and planet Earth. Let future generations disown us and label us as spineless cowards, if we do not act to stop this insanity and madness!

You have the free liberty to duplicate these materials and share them with the rest of the world, on social media or to whomever or wherever you find my words, in the hopes that this extreme state repression I am being subjected to by these racist police state pigs may stir the senses of world humanism, and motivate others to join the freedom train, in whichever ways they can, in spreading the word of the true realities of what Amerikkka's racist, pig prison torture chambers are all about, all in the name of the corporate greed profiteering of those who make a livelihood of imprisoning others and upholding the fascism of this capitalist/imperialist totalitarian police state. There is only one way out of this misery for us, and that is through class struggle and social revolution. I have my shovel in hand, and have joined the club of grave diggers, to dig the future grave of this racist, oppressive and criminal system of robbery called capitalism. Expropriate the expropriators!

I am awaiting to hear from a few parole lawyers I reached out to to see what their fees are to represent me at my upcoming parole review hearing, beginning in January 2021. Once I learn of all that, then I will make a call to accumulate support letters and other pleas for release and I will then post it to the world. So, stay tuned.

Again, thank you so much for your solidarity and support. It means a lot to me. Take care and stay safe of the COVID-19 virus.

All power to the oppressed!

"Today, the most powerful force for social transformation is the working class movement... Anarchists must recognize the usefulness and the importance of the workers' movement, must favor its development, and make it one of the levers for their action, doing all they can to see that it, in conjunction with all existing progressive forces, will culminate in a social revolution which leads to the suppression of classes and to complete freedom, equality, peace and solidarity amongst all human beings." –Errico Malatesta, Italian anarchist

Xinachtli Defense Committee Update – March 2020

The James V. Allred Prison Administration is subjecting Chicano political prisoner and jailhouse lawyer Xinachtli, s/n Alvaro Luna Hernandez, to a campaign of harassment and repeated discriminatory cellblock assignments to 12 Building Disciplinary Segregation Cellblock F Pod, housing those who violate prison rules, although Xinachtli has violated no prison rule. It is clear he is being subjected to these punitive assignments as part of prison repression to keep him further isolated, now, in a prison within a prison, and in a "psychiatric ward" also housing many intellectually disabled people under intense psychotropic drugged states, in a cellblock almost daily gassed with chemical agents, repeated instances of prisoner suicides, and repeated suspension of all activities, including denial of daily showers, and the proper cleaning of the cellblock by support service prisoners, during these emergency Coronavirus times necessitating proper hygiene and cleanliness.

Such repression is part of the prison's punitive, retaliatory measures against Xinachtli for his ongoing legal activities, and his outspokenness in speaking truth to racist, oppressive power, and him leading a revolutionary-education consciousness study group to preach prisoner unity among all captives, to study revolutionary theory, anarchism, and social liberation movements, and in helping others to file suits against the prison's institutional racism and inhumanity, and in making prisoners come to terms with the true nature of their capitalist-class imprisonment, as capitalism's "surplus populations" of poor, unemployed, and especially ethnic minority prisoners of AmeriKKKa's racist courts that maintain "quotas" for extrajudicially imprisoning all charged with crime, no matter their guilt or innocence, in a state known for imprisoning and executing the innocent, in Texas' modern-day chattel slavery of mass incarceration where

the Texas prisoner class is “cannon fodder” for its Texas Correctional Industries empire of assembly-line factories, and other forms of stoop slave labor under horrific working conditions, with no pay, resulting in loss of life and limb, all legalized by the 13th Amendment as “slavery and involuntary servitude” as punishment for crime.

The Texas prison system continues to be a fascist prison, notorious for its institutional racism and atrocities against its captive population, and other forms of extreme repression against captives such as Xinachtli, who refuse to submit and who continue fighting back, calling on oppressed prisoners to unite, and to demand to be treated like human beings and not animals. Animals in city zoos receive better treatment than Texas’ prison slaves, especially those such as Xinachtli in repressive solitary confinement for a prolonged duration designed to break prisoners and to dehumanize them into submission.

This specialized form of state repression is the brainchild of the notorious Dr. George Beto, who ruled Texas prisons with an iron fist, introducing the “leather strap” to beat striking prisoners, and “blacklisting” and barring from the prison attorneys such as Francis Jalet Cruz, and using the same discriminatory cellblock housing tactics now being used against Xinachtli in efforts to pressure prisoners to abandon their fights against the prison, withdraw their suits, and to renounce their ideas considered “revolutionary” and make them submit and stop exposing these inhumanities. All this is officially reported in *Cruz v. Beto*, 603 F.2d 1178 (5th Cir. 1978), involving George Beto, who federal courts found liable and ordered to pay monetary damages to Attorney Jalet Cruz, activist Fred Cruz, and the other clients of said attorney singled out by Beto into the Eight Hoe Field Force Squad for specialized repression.

Dr. George Beto is considered a god in prison circles, and his portrait is painted on many walls at various prisons in the state. His institutional psychology and his Texas-style form of prison fascism is alive and well today behind prison walls, as Beto taught his students at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, who moved on to work for the prison system either as prison guards or part of the administrative hierarchy of the prison empire. AmeriKKKa’s “control unit” prisons are designed with this purpose in mind, as Marion Federal Warden Ralph Aron testified, in the prison litigation relating to Marion’s prison lockdown, that the purpose of said “control units” was “to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison and society at large”, as is now being practiced against Xinachtli as part of the prison’s behavioral modification programs for social thought-control and extreme repression.

Repression against Xinachtli has intensified, especially since global support for him is growing, and freedom, justice-loving people learn of him, his history of struggles, outside and inside prison walls, and are horrified by this government’s continuing secret, dirty war against social militancy and dissent. Folk singer David Rovics has now written a “Ballad”, available to listen online, honoring Xinachtli for his lifetime commitment to change this racist, oppressive society and to a better world. Texas prison officials fear and despise the prospect that the outside world at large could become aware of its prison inhumanities, and to know that in AmeriKKKa not all is milk and honey, nor is it a paradise of democracy with equal justice for all, but in all reality it is a bastion of racism and oppression against the poor, and people of color, especially behind its barbed-wire prisons, and its “control units”, orchestrated by the white supremacist pig now occupying the White House, that violate all norms of human decency, and international human rights laws and standards, and are KKKoncentration KKKamps for the poor, of AmeriKKKa’s modern-day plantation slavery system and its prison industrial complex, disproportionately represented by black and brown people of color, of its genocidal, murderous and torturous system of mass incarceration, all for corporate profiteering, that should shock the conscience of humanity and stir our senses to act for change now, and support Xinachtli and the Texas prisoner class in the fight for dignity and humanity.

We are calling on all freedom, justice-loving peoples of the world to call and email Texas prison authorities and protest in the strongest of terms these crimes against humanity, telling the government: not in my name you won't!

Jimmy S. Smith Allred Warden: 940.855.7477

Bryan Collier Texas Prison Executive Director: 936.437-.101 Bryan.Collier@tdcj.texas.gov
exec.director@tdcj.texas.gov

Texas Governor Greg Abbott: 512.463.2000; gov.texas.gov

Program Supervisor Prison Access to Courts: 936.437.4815; atc@tdcj.state.tx.us

Janie Cockrell Office of Ombudsman Citizen Complaints: 936.437.4927; ombudsman@tdcj.texas.gov

Contact the Defense Committee at:

Post Office Box 7907

Austin, Texas 78713

937.224.1207; twitchon@gmail.com

My Revolutionary Resurrection!

You have falsified and destroyed our history, after you stole our lands, converting us into foreigners, illegal aliens in our own homeland. But you will never erase our identity, culture, tongue, our indigenous roots, you so fear and despise. We are a proud, noble, humble, compassionate people, and a valiant, revolutionary one.

We will forever rattle and break the chains, physical and mental, you have put on us as a brand of our inferiority, as your domestic wage-slaves.

We will unite in your factories and asphalt jungles and reservations and capitalist-profiteering prison cages of mass incarceration until we are free of your indoctrinated capitalist filth, your so-called values, your greed, your worship of material possessions, your white privileged ruling class barbarism you have subjected us to. We will unite against you, and free Mother Earth, who you hold under siege, destroying it for corporate profits.

You may have me in your racist prison dungeon cages now, and tomorrow you may kill me, but I vow to the world, you will never, ever kill my spirit, for I am of the quality of men that will live forever in the hearts and minds of the powerless, the voiceless, the oppressed. When you bury me again, this time in a cemetery grave and not in the grave you have me in now, I will resurrect from the grave to come back and hunt you, to dispense the revolutionary justice you have escaped, and to bury you and your racist, capitalist, imperialist systems deep in a grave, from which you will never, ever rise again to destroy others.

1 May - Stick-up on Rikers Island

David Campbell brings us inside the horror of Rikers Island, and thus other prisons and jails, amidst the pestilence.

MORE:

by David Campbell (*Hard Crackers*)

It started with the phones. A few minutes before 9:30 on Saturday morning, mid-conversation with wives, children, friends, and lawyers, the lines all went dead. This was March 22nd. Visits had been suspended a week prior, so the phones had become our only real link to the outside world. Of course, the underlying frustration had been building for weeks, ever since the pandemic had hit NYC. The news from outside was eerie; it seemed like everyone was panicking, like the world was shutting down. We knew that once

Coronavirus got into Rikers things would get ugly, fast. Our fears were confirmed when people in our building began to get sick and the Department of Correction (DOC) staff showed themselves to be largely indifferent. The three guys in our dorm who worked at West Facility, the island's medical center, started bringing us disturbing updates every evening, including the actual, unreported number of inmates in quarantine, which was growing faster than the medical staff could keep up with. When we heard the news that Ohio and L.A. – and even places with more despotic systems than our own, like Iran – were releasing prisoners, we knew our situation was serious, but also that we had a real shot at getting out. More than that, it actually made sense for a lot of us to get out – but would the people who made those decisions see it that way?

Knowing that incompetent people who don't care about you have your life in their hands is enough to make anyone anxious, but the true extent of the danger became apparent at a small number of specially-convened Inmate Councils in the week before the strike, and it set the whole building on edge. Inmate Councils are a theoretically-democratic meeting between delegates from each housing unit and the deputy wardens for the building, at which exactly nothing gets accomplished. Those last few councils before the pandemic took over were even more pointless than usual, except to make it clear that we were on our own. The DOC refused to test inmates or staff for Coronavirus or take their temperatures, refused to issue personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer or better cleaning products, and berated us for getting out of line when we tried to correct things they said that were flat-out untrue and dangerous, like "you can't spread it if you don't have the symptoms."

To make matters worse, the population of our dorm had roughly doubled from 20 to 40 in a matter of minutes on Saturday, March 14th. On Saturday, March 21st, the day before the strike, eight more people were moved in around 5AM, making us a fully-occupied 48-bed dorm – all this while posters recommending that we stay six feet apart were popping up all over the building. (Our beds are 2½ feet apart.) When we brought up overcrowding at Inmate Council, we were told that it was a gathering of less than 50 people, so it was OK, and advised to drink green tea.

On the morning of the 21st we started talking about a strike. Before long, we were actually discussing the mechanics of one. I don't remember who first floated the idea. I'd definitely mentioned it to a few people over the previous weeks, trying to plant the seed, but I can't take credit for organizing it. "Sticking it up," or refusing to cooperate with institutional policy, is just something that happens at Rikers. Sentenced inmates like us don't stick it up much. We tend to behave, because we're going home soon, unlike the detained inmates who form the bulk of the island's population. All of us discussing striking knew that we could lose good time [reduced from a sentence for good behavior] or be sent to the Box, but the circumstances that we'd been forced into meant that they were risks we were willing to take.

At lunch, I made sure to find Star in the mess hall and talk to him. Star was a shot-caller, a high-ranking gang member who ran the other dorm on our floor, although you'd never know it. He was a down-to-earth guy, well-liked and well-respected. I'd known him since the start of my bid almost six months ago, and lived in his dorm for nearly half that time. We got along well, and his dorm had been through the same stuff as us lately, including the overcrowding. I told him we'd been talking about a strike, perhaps Monday or Tuesday. He nodded, without a moment's hesitation: "If y'all stick it up on that side, we stickin' it up with you."

Our dorm didn't really have any gang affiliation – there were a few scattered members of different gangs, but none of them were trying to take things over or beefing with each other – or really any leader to speak of at this point. There were the 20 of us that had been in the dorm for a while already, and those who'd been crammed in with us in the past week. Despite the occasional petty jail dispute, we got along pretty well. We had all agreed to share the phone when the bulk of the new guys had arrived on the 14th – the

phones are often the first battleground in a dormitory power struggle – and had even organized ourselves into house cleaning crews when it had become apparent that the DOC wasn't going to do anything of substance to slow the spread of the disease. Another one of the old crew named Harris and I had been reporting back to the newly-packed dorm after the Inmate Council, explaining that we'd essentially have to fend for ourselves, which meant, at a minimum, cleaning the dorm thoroughly, several times a day. A tall, bald guy with a prominent neck tat stepped up and said that the new guys would be happy to draw up a schedule with us. The very next day, we had worked it out, written it up on a piece of cardboard, and glued it to the wall with toothpaste. It was a simple scheme that everyone could live with, and people were actually pretty good about implementing it. So even though we didn't have a rigid hierarchy and didn't know each other well, we were able to arrive at a consensus and organize ourselves in our own self-interest. This experience, I think, was really essential in laying the groundwork for the strike.

Neck Tat and a few other people emerged as de facto spokespeople for the new guys; Harris, myself, and a few others for the old crew. Neck Tat and Harris occasionally butted heads, usually because Neck Tat imagined some sort of slight. His brain was kinda fried from his heavy use of K2, but his heart was in the right place. "It's us against them," he would say, pinching the collar of his standard-issue forest green DOC shirt and then jabbing a finger at the nearest CO. When I commented to him that the dorm was running all right without any real leaders or petty politics, he answered "Hell yeah, the dorm can run itself better on its own. We just gotta stick together," before offering me a fist bump. Harris was a smart, funny and tough but unassuming guy that people respected, and who'd been fighting DOC's institutional bullshit pretty much since he'd arrived. They were both, as they say in here, "for the people."

I saw Star again at the yard on the afternoon of the 21st.

"Yo, my girl said she saw on Twitter that they're doing a hunger strike in the Hudson County Jail. They want masks, tests, all that. We do that, we gonna have the depts, the warden down there in no time to prevent a lawsuit."

I brought this suggestion back to the dorm and maybe a dozen of us kicked around our ideas; refuse to go to work, refuse to go to chow, or refuse to eat at all. A few guys were strongly advocating for a one or two-day hunger strike ("Some of y'all niggas need to stop eatin' for a day!"), but most favored a milder form of protest. Many, fed up and recognizing that we had some momentum, were in favor of some sort of action, but were confused: "What's the point? What are we gonna get?" I talked about how protest actions usually have a list of demands, and how it's probably best to aim high, knowing you won't get everything you want. I also promised them, as I'd promised Star at the yard earlier, that if we went on strike I would contact my activist friends on the outside immediately, who'd do their best to get the word out on social media and hopefully to the media as well. We loosely identified our demands and left it at that. If nothing else, we said, media or social media coverage of a strike might help convince people outside of what was going on in here. The impression we'd been getting was that most people thought it was "not that bad, like it's no big deal" as one guy put it.

Later that afternoon, we ran out of a number of cleaning supplies and were told we'd have to wait until Monday to get them replaced. This left us with a few bars of hand soap, two week-old mop heads, one sponge, and no disinfectant for the entire dorm. Around 11PM that night, four of the eight inmates who'd been moved in at 5 that morning were hastily moved out; the DOC had tested them for Coronavirus because they'd been in contact with a confirmed case, but hadn't waited for their test results. Now, after they'd spent nearly 24 hours beside us in the crowded dorm, it turned out that their results had come back positive, so they were being taken into quarantine. The anger at the DOC's bungling was seething, palpable. None of us had masks, so we wrapped t-shirts or scraps of bedsheets around our faces and tried to sleep that way. The fire alarm went off at 3AM. This had been happening on and off for the past few

months. Usually, it stopped for a few minutes, but this time the blinding flash and the ear-splitting siren continued for 20 minutes straight, waking us all from our tenuous sleep, fraying our tempers further.

Then came Sunday morning and the dead phone lines. When the captain on duty arrived for his hourly check at 9:30, he was swarmed by guys demanding an explanation. He told us that if we cleaned the dorm, the phones could come back on at 10:30. (Never mind the fact that we'd been cleaning the place three times a day.) We cleaned. The phones didn't come back on at 10:30. Guys kept trying them. At 10:45, one guy picked up the phone only to hear the same cool, robotic female voice: "No calls are allowed at this time." He slammed the phone down.

"Yo, fuck that!" someone cried, "We stickin' it up for chow!"

"Man, It's chicken day."

"Some things are more important."

"Man, fuck that chicken!"

"We stickin' it up for chow! Anybody go to chow pack they ass up!" ("Packing someone up" is the act of forcing someone, sometimes with violence but usually just the threat of it, to pack their stuff into a trash bag and request an immediate transfer because they don't feel safe.)

"No chow!" echoed up and down the dorm. To this was added the cry of "No work!"

"We stickin' it up!"

"No work, no chow!"

I rushed into the bathroom, climbed onto the back of the toilet in stall 6, and yelled into the air vent for Star. The air vents between our two dorms are connected, and if you stand on the back of one of the toilets, you can even see the person you're talking to on the other side. I swear, I don't know who designs these places. Star's face appeared a minute later.

"Yo, we stickin' it up! It's lit!" he said.

"Us too. Chow and no work."

"Yup. We stayin' right here, and we eatin' outta our buckets [commissary food] and that's it."

I told him that as soon as the phones came back on – hoping they actually would – I'd call my friends on the outside and ask them to get the word out.

Back at my bed, my neighbor Dominicano turned to me and said "I'm stickin' it up for you man, 'cause I know what you're about. And I like the unity that's going on right now."

He was one of the three guys who worked at the West Facility, where they make about \$300 a week for their efforts, rather than the \$40-\$80 most of us make, so I was kind of surprised and a bit flattered to hear him say that. Normally they would have left for work early in the morning, but strangely, none of the work details had been picked up for the morning shift yet. It seemed the institutional schedule was starting to break down under the stress of its pivoting, however half-heartedly, to face the crisis. At any rate, this

meant that we had two dorms full of striking workers, including guys who normally would have been at work already. Ironically, the three West Facility guys were actually the only ones to go to work that day. Their boss showed up a half hour later and threatened to fire them if they didn't come out; I guess they weren't ready for that level of repercussion. Dominicano and I shared a laugh about his change of heart as he was putting on his shoes. I jokingly accused him of selling out the revolution. In truth, I couldn't be mad at him for breaking ranks. It actually is decent money by jail standards, and some of these guys have families to support. More importantly, it didn't seem to affect our resolve. The rest of us were still determined not to go to work in the kitchen, or the warehouse, or the commissary, or on the sanitation crew, or to touch the chow.

"Yo, I'm chefin' it up for all y'all nigas who ain't got it to eat," Neck Tat declared, holding a couple packs of fish and Ramen Noodles over his head. "If you got some extra, throw it right here." Many of us chipped in, and soon he and a small crowd of jailhouse sous-chefs were busily preparing a massive lunch for the old crew and the new guys alike.

The phones came back on a short time later. With the inevitable rush, I had a long wait in front of me but I convinced a friend to let me jump in for a few minutes after I explained that I was trying to get word about our strike to the outside. I called a trusted activist friend who picked up right away. "You got a pen?" I asked. I spoke quickly in case the phones were cut off again.

"Two dorms of 45 inmates at Rikers are refusing to leave our dorms for work duties or for meals. We must take these actions in protest of the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies provided to inmates, the crowded living conditions imposed on us prior to the pandemic and made worse by the daily addition of new inmates from other facilities, some of whom are highly likely to have been exposed to the COVID-19 virus, and the arbitrary disconnection of our phones for three hours on the morning of March 22nd. We demand the same calls issued by the Board of Correction, that all inmates over 50 with parole violations, at high risk due to health conditions, and with less than a year of sentenced time be immediately released." Then, on the spot, I added: "and this is in solidarity with the hunger strikers in the Hudson County Jail." Usually I prefer to operate by consensus, so I felt a bit weird about unilaterally speaking for both dorms, but then, it was pretty much what we talked about, just cleaned up, and that task likely would have been delegated to me anyway.

"And that's for wide distribution?"

"As wide as possible, my friend."

"Got it."

A few more guys were called out to work. They all stood firm: "We're not coming out today." It was a good sign, but the first true test of our stick-up didn't come until a bit later, when the CO posted to our dorm called "Walkin' out for chow!"

The response was swift and unanimous:

"You eat it!"

"We ain't goin'!"

"We're not hungry!"

The COs tried to convince us to just walk down to the mess hall and back so that, on paper at least, they could say we had gone to chow. This, too, we refused:

“We stickin’ it up!”

The same captain who had bullshitted us about the phones earlier came back. He wasn’t scheduled to check on the dorm again for another hour, which meant we had their attention. Inmates notice these sorts of things. The dorm, usually buzzing with noise and activity, was quiet. All eyes were on him.

“What do you hope to gain by refusing chow?” he asked.

“Well,” said a young Trinitario from Bushwick, “it’s our way of peaceful protest.” He had participated in the strike discussions, and he seemed pretty pleased with his answer. A few guys mumbled their agreement.

The captain asked what we were protesting, was promptly bombarded with a loud litany of complaints from all corners of the room, and left.

This was around noon. Around 1PM, the phones were cut off again. This time it was very clear to us that we were being punished. The captain came back with the deputy warden, or “dep.” At first, we took this as a sign of progress – our demands had moved up the chain. Perhaps, even without a full-blown hunger strike, we’d get the warden himself down here to negotiate with us next.

“The ignorance here is astonishing,” Dep. Rothwell began in a chiding tone, before stating, with astonishing ignorance, “Coronavirus is just a common cold. That’s it!”

Some guys seemed cowed by her attack, others bristled.

“Ma’am that’s just not true,” I responded. “The news is saying –”

She cut me off. “Do you believe everything you hear on the news?” She called us all ignorant again.

“People are dying!” someone said. Someone else asked why COs weren’t being tested before coming to work, and why they weren’t wearing masks.

“My COs don’t have to do anything they don’t want to,” she snapped like a petulant child. “They can do anything they want.” Our demands for PPE, hand sanitizer, and cleaning products were rudely nixed. We complained that they were overcrowding us, and moving people they knew were likely infected into the dorm.

“Well, where do you want us to put them?” she asked.

“Not our problem.”

“OK then, so it’s not my problem either” she shot back, her eyes flashing. We demanded to speak to the warden.

“I’m running the jail right now,” she said, “No one else. Me.” She was getting more flustered by the second, and her hands were beginning to shake. She brushed a lock of hair from her forehead and started trying to tell us that all we needed to do was cover our coughs, wash our hands –

“And stay six feet apart!” someone interjected angrily. There had naturally been a bit of people talking over each other, with 40 inmates crowded around her, but in general we’d been polite and respectful up to that point. Now, that began to fall apart.

“What do you want?” she asked coldly.

“Release us.”

Through gritted teeth: “Try again.” Her eyes darted around angrily. She stuffed a hand in a pocket to hide its tremors and backed away, calling us ignorant one last time. “We’re just gonna hafta move them, split them up,” she said to the captain.

The atmosphere in the room turned gloomy. It seemed like we’d run up against a wall and won nothing except the hassle of a transfer, which is a huge pain, even if it isn’t to the box. I set aside the books I wanted to take with me, and exchanged contact information with a few guys.

The captain came back with a CO holding a camcorder behind him (they’re big on video records in here) and asked us if we wanted chow. Everyone shouted “No!” in unison. It was a beautiful sight, but to me it felt like a last hurrah, like an act of fuck-you defiance more than a protest. He came back with the camera again and asked if we’d eat the food if they brought it to us. The response was muddled. A line of COs holding lunch trays appeared at the door. A small crowd formed, glancing at each other. There was a moment’s hesitation, and a hasty and half-assed debate. About 15 guys gave in and ate the chicken. It seemed like we’d lost some momentum. Still, I wasn’t mad – it was less than half the total in our dorm, which was only half the strike, and in any case, we’d forced them to bring it to us. That in itself was already a pretty remarkable achievement. Perhaps that was all we’d get, perhaps it was over, but at least we’d tried.

Star called me to the vent and we spoke again. He was pissed about the guys on my side that had eaten the chicken, but I managed to talk him down. He told me about their meeting with Dep. Rothwell had gone about as well as ours. He was elated when I told him I’d managed to contact my friend on the outside and give him our demands.

“That’s what’s up!”

The phones stayed dead all afternoon, and the air in the room seemed to match. Guys laid on their beds or crammed into the dayroom to watch TV. Work details came to pick us up; we all refused to go. People snacked on stuff they’d bought at the commissary. Two OGs on opposite sides of the room sat grumbling on and off for hours to whoever would listen – one about how he’d been at Attica and we needed to start lighting our bedsheets on fire, the other about how our stick-up was “corny as hell. Ain’t nothin’ gonna change.”

Around 4PM, Mayor de Blasio held one of his live Coronavirus press conferences. During the Q & A, a reporter asked him if he could confirm reports of two dorms of 45 people each on Rikers Island refusing to go to work or meals. Everyone froze. We held our breath until de Blasio finished answering, just in case he said something that mattered to us, and then the dayroom exploded – guys jumped out of their seats, cheering, laughing, jumping up and down, bumping fists and slapping backs.

“I’ve never been a part of something like that,” an avowedly apolitical friend told me, “making a difference. And it happened so fast!” He looked like he couldn’t believe it himself. “This thing’s got legs now.” Someone had heard us.

At 5:45PM, we unanimously refused dinner. To be fair, it was everyone's least favorite meal, baloney sandwiches, but it felt like we'd gotten back whatever spark we'd lost. A new captain came in and tried to talk us out of it. At first, he tried the same line about the common cold (were they using a script?), but once he saw that we weren't going to budge, he listened patiently to our demands, and then told us he'd do "everything in [his] power" to meet them, although he admitted release was "above [his] paygrade."

A few minutes later, the phones came back on. I rushed over to one and called my friend again. It seemed our strike had indeed gotten a pretty wide distribution: from the activists (mostly anarchists and abolitionists) it had spread to journalists, and finally politicians. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez had mentioned us in her fireside chat, and of course de Blasio had been asked about us on live TV. By 6PM, we saw COs unloading boxes upon boxes of sponges, mop heads, hand soap and disinfectant, and piling their contents high. The second came back with a doctor in surgical gear and an assistant wheeling a medical stand to screen us for symptoms and answer questions we had about Coronavirus. One of the first things they told us was that it was definitely not the common cold.

They took our temperatures, asked us if we had symptoms, and gave us each a surgical mask. The masks, they said, would be given out once a week; the screenings would happen once a day. I had my doubts, but beneath my crisp new cotton mask, I couldn't help but smile. In one day, we had forced them to the bargaining table, and had actually won concessions. A few dozen thieves and crackheads, dealers and brawlers, gangbangers and check-forgers had put their collective foot down and demanded that the DOC live up to their rhetoric and treat us as dignified human beings.

There was talk of continuing the stick-up into Monday, but we woke to find ourselves in "quarantine" because of our exposure to the four inmates who'd tested positive. This effectively hamstrung us, as we weren't allowed to leave the dorm for work or meals anyway. On Wednesday night, three-quarters of the sentenced inmates on the island were released, including the overwhelming majority of the guys in our two dorms. Star, Neck Tat, and Dominicano all went home. Harris and I are still here, along with about ten others, all of us hoping to be released soon. It took us about three weeks to get new masks. The screenings became less and less frequent and then stopped. Cleaning supplies, while not as difficult to procure as they were before, are being treated as a luxury by COs again. At least, I guess, we never got transferred.

Things are bad in here, and the future is uncertain. But for my part, I think our strike had a direct role in getting all those sentenced inmates – and now, more than a thousand detainees – released, and that makes me happy. Maybe we only accelerated something that would have begun soon anyway, but we did it. We took a risk, we told the outside world that it was not "not that bad" in here. It only lasted one day – hell, less than that – but we did it because we really felt we had no other choice, and we did it together, and amazingly, it kind of worked.

2 May - Demand New Trial For Imam Jamil Al-Amin FKA H. Rap Brown

Kairi Al-Amin, attorney and son of Imam Jamil Al-Amin, started this petition to Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard and four others.

MORE:

change.org/p/fulton-county-district-attorney-paul-howard-new-trial-for-imam-jamil-al-amin-fka-h-rap-brown

As Always, We begin with the greeting of peace, As-Salaamu Alaikum,

As you may know, my father, Imam Jamil Al-Amin, formerly H. Rap Brown civil rights leader and humanitarian, was convicted of a murder he did not commit in 2002.

Upon that conviction, we essentially abandoned him. No tangible noise was ever made and as such, my father's conviction and subsequent exile, a vendetta realized, has gone unchecked. The cruel and unusual punishment, the confession of another man, the medical neglect in hopes that he dies, the gag order, the federal holding of a state prisoner away from his attorney's and family, we've done nothing about anything and because of our lack of action, much like the man himself, the truth about this case and his legacy have been erased from public view.

If we don't commit to action, the same action he dedicated himself to for the entirety of his life, the same action many of you are benefiting from while he sits suffering silently, then we have turned our backs on our Imam...your brother and should be ashamed.

We have been fighting this fight in the courts for 20 years and because the outward appearance is that "his people don't even care about him," we haven't gotten anything more than "yes he deserves a new trial but no you can't have one" and again that's on us because, what have we done about it?

Alhamdulillah though, we've been afforded yet another opportunity and this time, we aren't even asking you to decide his guilt or innocence though it should be obvious, we are only asking that you help him get the opportunity to prove his innocence to you and salvage his name. A fair trial, where the man who confessed to this crime actually testifies, where constitutional rights are respected and where the state prosecutors misconduct is not overlooked and subsequently rewarded with a federal judgeship. No, we want a fair trial...that's all.

That being said, if you can get behind the idea of Imam Jamil or anyone for that matter finally receiving a fair opportunity to prove their innocence, then please, sign and share our petition.

We must let District Attorney Paul Howard and The Fulton County Conviction Integrity Unit know that we are paying attention and we demand fairness and justice at the very least.

11 May - Mutual Aid Monday!

WHAT: MACC Mutual Aid network meeting

WHEN: 7:00pm, Monday, May 11th

WHERE: Online on Zoom at is.gd/z7P9qd (RSVP required)

COST: FREE!

MORE:

Join us to organize the MACC Mutual Aid network, a real alternative to capitalism. Email maccmutualaid@protonmail.com to get the meeting ID and password! We will send out the meeting ID and password on the day of the event.