

California: Immigrants go on hunger strike at Adelanto Detention Facility

By Kevin Martinez
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Last week, more than 30 inmates of the Adelanto Detention Facility in California began a hunger strike protesting the lack of medical care and demanding their release pending their immigration court dates. This is the fourth hunger strike since June 12 at the for-profit facility, located in the desert town of Adelanto in San Bernardino County, which is used to jail immigrants awaiting deportation. The jail can hold 1,900 inmates and was at near capacity in March, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

There has been conflicting information from authorities as well as from friends and relatives of the hunger strikers who are in direct communication with them. Adelanto officials have made it virtually impossible for journalists and others to determine exactly what is going on at the camp, how many have been on strike and for how long.

Reports suggest the strike began one morning when nine men, most of whom were asylum seekers from El Salvador, refused to go back to their cells after breakfast until they could see someone about their concerns. They were then pepper sprayed and forced back into their cells, according to ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice and Tristan Call, a spokesman for the detainees.

Some of the detainees were slammed against the wall and one detainee was beaten so severely that he had a dental crown knocked out. The guards then forced them to take hot showers, worsening the pain from the pepper spray, and humiliated them with verbal insults. ICE and GEO Group, the private prison company that runs the jail, promised the hunger strikers that they would investigate the incident and punish the guilty parties.

The men filed a complaint with the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil

Liberties, which said that in addition to the beatings they were denied medical treatment and access to their lawyers. ICE spokeswoman Kice wrote, "The claim the men involved in this disturbance were beaten is a gross and regrettable exaggeration."

The hunger strikers demanded that they be immediately released on their own "recognizance (since we do not have the resources to pay inflated bond amounts)" and "good faith negotiation from ICE with our entire group of hunger strikers and a lawyer of our choosing present."

According to the strikers, bond rates are kept at unreasonably high amounts to deny detainees release, and ICE lied to them about their role in the issue. Isaac Lopez Castillo, a spokesman for the group, told activists by telephone, "ICE lied to us, because with the bond issue, we believed that [what ICE told us] was true, that only a judge can decide. But now we realize that's not true, that these bonds are given by ICE. ICE can do something to lower the bonds ... they can parole us without bond. We feel that they tricked us, and we are going to continue because we aren't anyone's toys."

In another statement the group declared, "We are from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. We ask for your attention, because Adelanto is one of the prisons which exists for those who are seeking political asylum, and in reality our records are clean, none of us have prior criminal records. The bail is set impossibly high, and it's a humiliating joke because we are poor, we don't have that kind of money."

Reportedly, a group of Haitian immigrant detainees have joined their Central American comrades on hunger strike.

The group has also protested against the lack of Spanish-language paperwork, unclean food that is only

given to them once a day, used underwear worn by other inmates, belongings of detainees thrown away, and short religious services.

The Adelanto hunger strikers had planned to refuse meals for a minimum of 72 hours until their demands were met. Rallies have been held in their defense outside of the Adelanto jail and outside of the Los Angeles ICE office. Another hunger strike had broken out at the same time in Tacoma, Washington, by 35 immigrant women detained at the Northwest Detention Center, which is also run by the same private prison company, GEO Group.

On June 14, a hunger strike led by 30 women at the Adelanto jail refused food for 24 hours until they received medical care, “basic respect” from guards, lower bond rates, and to be returned to their families. The strike ended the next day when many of the women received medical care.

At least six people have died at the Adelanto jail in the last five years, three of them since March 22, making it the “deadliest immigration detention center in the country.” In April, Nicaraguan national Osmar Epifanio Gonzalez-Gadba died from injuries after attempting suicide by hanging a week prior. He had been held in solitary confinement in a one-man room when guards reportedly discovered him.

In a 2012 internal investigation of the jail, ICE found numerous health care requests denied, little record keeping, and failure to report sexual assaults.

Another report from 2015 documented how 44-year old Raul Ernesto Morales-Ramos had died from liver and kidney failure after waiting more than a year to see a doctor. The high turnover of medical staff and the lack of medical supplies led to even more delays. Medical experts from Human Rights Watch concluded that Morales-Ramos was most likely dying from cancer.

The conditions at Adelanto were so notorious that a dozen members of Congress wrote a letter to ICE stating their opposition to the expansion of the jail because of the abuses.

Immigrants can wait months, if not years, in the for-profit jails run by ICE and built by Democratic and Republican administrations. According to the Department of Justice and Syracuse University’s TRAC research center, there are 326 immigration judges handling 600,000 pending cases. Even if there

were a moratorium on new cases, it would take more than two years to go through all the remainder.

While immigration cases are pending ICE can decide whether to hold a person indefinitely if they are determined to be a “potential flight risk.” At least half, and in some years up to two-thirds, of detainees in ICE custody are awaiting DHS to proceed with a court hearing with the median bail set at \$8,000. One in five immigrants stay in jail because they can’t afford to post bail.

At least 41,000 immigrants have been arrested since Donald Trump took office, inaugurating a wave of repression against working class immigrants. The number arrested is up 38 percent from the same period last year, with more than 10,000 labeled “non-criminal immigrants,” an increase of 150 percent from a year before.

In his March budget proposal, President Trump plans to spend an additional \$1.5 billion on “expanded detention, transportation, and removal of illegal immigrants.”

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