

Deliberate neglect leads to inmate death at New York's Rikers Island

By Leslie Murtagh and Philip Guelpa
3 February 2018

Rikers Island, the country's largest prison complex, housed on its own 400-acre island on the East River in New York City, has spawned its latest grim inmate death. On December 30, Joseph Foster, a 51-year-old prisoner who was serving a six-month sentence for a drug sale, was ignored while screaming for medical attention over a massive headache and numbness on the left side of his body.

After begging for help for nearly an hour from inside his cell, jail supervisors finally called for an ambulance. Following five days in the hospital, Foster, who had a known history of high blood pressure and diabetes, died. Court records indicate that his lawyer had requested additional medical care for Foster at his trial in early December.

"He kept screaming, 'I need a doctor! I need a doctor!'" said neighboring inmate, Carlos Renta, who contacted the *Daily News* because of how disturbing this event was to witness. "They should have acted sooner."

In a similar case in 2012, Jason Echevarria, a 25-year-old inmate serving in a facility for the mentally ill on Rikers, ingested toxic soap while in solitary confinement. Jason pled for medical help for hours while vomiting and spitting up blood. The captain in charge gave explicit orders to officers on duty not to bother him (the captain) unless "there was a dead body." The next morning, there was a chemically burned dead body. In an acknowledgement of its culpability, the city paid \$3.8 million in a settlement with Echevarria's family.

These and innumerable other such incidents highlight not merely indifference, but an active, intentional neglect of the responsibility to ensure a modicum of care for the incarcerated.

Rikers' massive jail system, which has a yearly

budget of \$860 million, a staff of 10,000, and 100,000 inmate admissions every year (over 1 percent of the NYC population), is infamous for its long history of corruption and violence towards inmates. This notoriety led to the announcement last year by Mayor Bill de Blasio of the start to a decade-long process to shut down Rikers Island, which would require substantial expansion of the rest of the New York City prison system. Last week, the NYC architecture firm, Perkins Eastman, was awarded \$7.6 million to conduct a 10-month study that researches this expansion to accommodate the shutting down of the city's main jail.

The plan to close Rikers and disperse the inmates to smaller jails is predicated on the fallacy that the facility itself prompts the mistreatment. In reality, it is a purely cosmetic action, presenting a veneer of reform to confuse and divert attention from the reality of the capitalist justice system, which is designed to oppress and terrorize the working class. The plan will do nothing to alter the brutality suffered by those incarcerated, whether at Rikers or elsewhere.

Rikers is not by any means an isolated case. This point was emphasized when, earlier this month, Lieutenant Carlos Richard Martinez of the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC), a federal prison in Brooklyn, was found guilty of repeated rape of a female inmate over the course of several months. Two of Martinez's coworkers at MDC, Lieutenant Eugenio Perez and correctional officer Armando Moronta, have also been charged with sexually abusing multiple female inmates and are awaiting trial.

In 2016, federal judge Cheryl Pollak expressed hesitation to sentence any women to MDC, describing the jail as "a third world country," after the National Association of Women Judges reported on the conditions for female inmates as "unconscionable."

Their 2016 report stated: “The absence of fresh, clean air, the complete absence of sunlight, and the absence of ANY outdoor time and activities are immediate issues which BOP [Federal Bureau of Prisons] has failed to address in any meaningful fashion.”

The findings of a 2016 *Huffington Post* study on inmate deaths across the US speak to the bleak conditions facing inmates: in a single year, 815 deaths were documented from preventable causes, with nearly a third (31 percent) the result of suicide. The study also showed that the majority of in-custody deaths occur within a week of entering a jail.

These hellish conditions of brutality in American jails are endured most by the poorest sections of the working class, unable to afford bail and helplessly awaiting trial for a period of months, or even years.

According to the 2017 report by the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform (a group assembled by New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito that focuses on the closing of Rikers Island and improving the city’s prison system), three-quarters of all inmates held in New York City’s jails are awaiting trial or the outcome of their trial, “nearly all of them because they cannot afford bail.” “These individuals have been found guilty of no crime.”

Though there are undetermined plans to shut down Rikers Island in the future and undertake reform in the meantime, these changes will only be cosmetic and aimed at pacifying public outcry. They will not address the social and economic conditions underlying the corruption and abuse within prisons and the prevalence of mass incarceration in a city that is the wealthiest and most expensive city in America, and contains the largest homeless population.

Social inequality is only growing more extreme, with new figures emerging each year more shocking and appalling than the last. Most recently, Oxfam released a report last week that found that the world’s richest 1 percent earned 82 percent of the global wealth generated in 2017, while the world’s poorest 50 percent, 3.7 billion people, did not see any increase in their wealth at all. Such conditions will rapidly lead to immense social explosions.

Rampant inequality and prison brutality are expressions of a capitalist system of repression, set on controlling the working class. This system offers no

solution to widespread poverty or heinous prison crimes, but relies on increasing force and violence to protect the ruling elite and subdue worker opposition.

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