

US Federal Bureau of Prisons implements full lockdown amid mass protests across the country

By Sam Dalton
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The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has placed its facilities on full lockdown as protests triggered by the police murder of George Floyd have spread across the United States and internationally. The BOP runs all federal prison facilities which house nearly 13 percent of all prisoners in the US. This is the first action of this kind since 1995, when a series of prison rebellions beginning in Talladega, Alabama engulfed the system.

On Sunday, the BOP sent an announcement to its employees stating, “The BOP has implemented a national lockdown as of 4 p.m. due to the ongoing unrest and riots nationwide.” It continued, “We will assume lockdown protocols for everyone’s safety and until it is calm around the nation.” The BOP oversees 122 prisons across the country with 165,575 inmates and 36,846 employees.

This action coincides with an increasingly acute health crisis within the entire US prison system due to the spread of COVID-19. As of May 27, in all US prisons and jails, at least 34,584 people have tested positive for the virus and 455 have died. In BOP facilities alone, there have been 5,239 cases and 64 deaths. Given the widespread lack of testing, these figures are likely an underestimation of the virus’ true toll. Despite a widely-publicized release order by US Attorney General William Barr on April 23, since the beginning of the pandemic only 3,000 BOP inmates have been released. This mirrors slow releases across the entire US prison system since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As federal law enforcement agents, BOP personnel have also been intimately involved in the violent and unconstitutional attacks by the capitalist state on protesters across the US in recent days. On Tuesday,

Barr directed the BOP to send prison riot teams to Miami and Washington, D.C. As early as 7:30 a.m. on Wednesday morning, heavily armed riot teams were seen guarding roads approaching the White House in Washington, D.C.

The federal prison lockdown does not only condemn thousands of inmates to indefinite isolation in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Politically, it exposes the ruling class’s fear of the ongoing international mass protest movement. As the Trump administration intensifies its criminal repression of protesters, it fears that conditions in prisons and the mass sympathy for the strike movement amongst US prisoners will combine and lead to a huge wave of prison rebellions. In conditions where the class lines that divide society are becoming increasingly clear and hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets, the ruling class is not willing to take any chances with its prisons.

The potential for prisoner unrest has been exacerbated by their criminal mistreatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The BOP put its facilities into a partial lockdown on March 31 more than two months after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the US. The haphazard response to the pandemic actually led to a suspension of most health services for prisoners, forcing them to remain locked-in place in unsanitary facilities and even condemned many to solitary confinement. Furthermore, arrests, imprisonments and releases without testing have continued through the pandemic, meaning that prisons have acted as vectors in the diseases’ spread through working class communities.

Reflecting the international nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the uniformity of the capitalist class’

callous response, prison unrest has been an international phenomenon since the outbreak of the virus in January of this year. Prison rebellions have been recorded in France, Italy, Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Peru, Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, Syria and Sierra Leone. Hundreds of prisoners have died in these struggles. The international nature of the current wave of protests will undoubtedly reignite these desperate populations.

In recent months, the US has also seen a recent spate of prison unrest. From the end of December 2019, eleven inmates died in a month of violence in Mississippi state prison riots. Despite prison officials explaining the events as a “gang-war,” inmates insist they were instigated by prison guards. These tensions have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In April, following an outbreak of the virus at a facility in Lansing, Kansas, inmates ransacked offices before the rebellion was contained by guards. Also in April, the Ohio National Guard was called into the Elkton Federal Correctional Institution under the auspice of helping contain an outbreak at the facility.

Historically, prison rebellions have repeatedly coincided with wider social movements and strike waves throughout American and world history. In the late sixties, major prison riots occurred across the US as hundreds of thousands took to the streets to fight for civil rights and protest the Vietnam war. This culminated in the Attica prison riot in 1971 where hundreds of prisoners in New York took 42 staff hostages. After a 4-day stand-off, an assault by state forces ended the siege. During the uprising 33 prisoners and 10 correctional officers were dead. Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, there were also a series of prison riots from the Crash through the mid-1930s.

As conditions continue to deteriorate in prisons and in wider society, prisons and jails will undoubtedly become a focus for class tensions. The US’s incarcerated population are almost exclusively working class and enjoy broad sympathy. Many of the slogans and hashtags used in relation to the current wave of protests have correctly made the link between the struggle against police brutality and the end of mass incarceration. The recognition of the inter-relatedness of these issues must not stop there, however. These issues, which plague the working class regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, cannot be separated from

their ultimate cause: capitalism.

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