

Virginia Officials Respond to Prison Hunger Strike by Torturing Strikers (2024)

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PROTESTING ILLEGAL ABUSES

On March 23, 2024 the Virginia legislature passed a new law restricting the use and duration of solitary confinement in the state's prisons. (1) This law was enacted in response to years of public protest against Virginia's ongoing abuses of long term solitary confinement. Despite this law and Virginia officials leading the public to believe they had stopped using solitary confinement long ago, the abuse secretly continued at the state's remote super maximum security prisons Red Onion State Prison (ROSP) and Wallens Ridge State Prison (WRSP). These two prisons, which are hidden away in the remote mountains of southwestern Virginia, have been notorious for abuse and racism since they first opened in 1998 and 1999 respectively.

On Dec 26, 2023 seven prisoners at ROSP, including myself, began a hunger strike protesting abuses at the prison, including the continued abuse of indefinite solitary confinement.

I, and several others of us, had been designated for placement on this status at Red Onion. I was also protesting my recent transfer to ROSP in retaliation for publicizing abuses in Virginia's prisons and my removal from Virginia's central region near loved ones and major medical facilities while I suffered major health conditions (cancer and cardiac conditions) that require specialized care unavailable in the Virginia Department of Correction's (sic!) [VDOC] western region where ROSP is located.

Because I was seen as a leader of the hunger strike and a source of generating public support for and attention to the protest, I was notified the day after our strike began that the warden decided to disapprove my assignment to the indefinite solitary confinement status.

Despite this effort to placate me I remained on the strike with the others who had not been offered such concessions.

A PLOT TO DIVIDE AND CONQUER UNITES OUR STRIKE

When this attempt to pacify me failed to break my participation or to divide us, ROSP officials separated everyone on the strike, moving us to different cellblocks on Dec 30th. This ploy to divide us failed however, as the next morning 15 of the 21 other prisoners in the cellblock with me joined the strike. As the days passed and word about the strike spread at ROSP, many others across the prison also joined the strike.

On Dec 30th, when we were separated into different cellblocks, Red Onion officials began using abuse and torture in efforts to force me off the strike. That morning a Sergeant Osborne was ordered to turn off the water in my cell so I couldn't drink, flush the commode, bathe nor clean

the cell; he also took most of my personal property including hygiene items, books, all bedding except a mattress and two blankets, etc. As these measures also failed to coerce me off the strike, I was moved on Jan 3, 2024 into a cold isolation cell in the prison's medical department, where all my remaining property was taken including my law books, eyeglasses, all writing supplies and my blankets. To further isolate me, several other striking prisoners who were previously housed in the medical department were moved out when I was brought in. I was held alone in the medical department.

This cell's water had also been shut off, and I was denied anything to drink. As a result of having already gone days without water I was dehydrated and had to be rushed to a local ER on Jan 4th for intravenous hydration. While held in the ROSP medical cell, my only option for hydration was water from the uncleaned commode. As a result I remained severely dehydrated for the duration of my confinement in that department and had to be taken to the ER several times for IV hydration. I was made to live like an animal, remaining under these conditions – denied water, showers, heat, clean clothes and so on – for weeks, solely because I was on a hunger strike. This was all done under direct supervision and instruction of the ROSP warden Rick White, security chief J. Hall, chief mental health clinician Creech, medical administrator D. Trent and other top level ROSP administrators and healthcare providers acting as a “hunger strike committee.” Their role was explicitly to coerce and torture me off the strike.

FAILED EFFORTS TO FORCE FEED ME

When these efforts to force me off the strike failed, on Jan 26th the ROSP warden, petitioned the local courts for an order to allow them to force feed me. Representing myself I was found by the courts to be exercising my 1st Amendment rights to engage in the hunger strike, and that I was competent. The request to force feed me was therefore denied. The court did rule that the VDOC could have me evaluated by mental health professionals independent of the VDOC however.

Based on this ruling I was taken to the Medical College of Virginia hospital (MCV) where I was evaluated by a psychiatrist the following day and was found again to be competent. But instead of VDOC officials respecting my 1st Amendment right to strike, more torture and abuse followed.

ISOLATED AND WATCHED OVER BY MILITARIZED GUARDS

I was then transferred to the medical infirmary at VDOC's State Farm Prison (SFI), which has largely been closed down, where I was confined on an abandoned wing that had been previously condemned in yet another cell with no running water. This time I was watched over by a rotating cycle of militarized 'Strike Force' guards (three at a time) in 12 hour shifts, who were brought in from prisons across the state, each paid a \$2000 overtime wage every few days just to sit watching me – a clear waste of manpower and resources in a prison system that frequently complains of gross understaffing.

I was housed at SFI on the isolated wing alone and had no contact with any other prisoners for the duration of my stay at SFI.

At SFI I was denied access to my personal property, had almost no contact with loved ones by phone or mail, and suffered under constant observation of the Strike Force guards whose specific training is to respond violently to riots, hostage situations and similar incidents where specialized armed intervention is authorized.

WASTED RESOURCES AND MANPOWER

These guards were neither needed nor justified to watch a prisoner on hunger strike, and I was the only prisoner on strike held under this level of observation. VDOC Strike Force guards generally behave antagonistically and belligerently towards prisoners; their role again is one of violent intervention and they thus expect to be seen as a deterrent and intimidating presence, so they behave arrogantly and with open antagonism toward prisoners, with their identities typically concealed since their behavior is frequently controversial and abusive leading to complaints and litigation – unlike other VDOC guards they never wear identifying nametags.

The constant presence of these guards under direct orders of VDOC headquarter administrators in response to my hunger strike was intended to add another layer of coercion, antagonism, intimidation and threat in efforts to force me off the hunger strike. I clashed repeatedly with these Strike Force guards but remained on the hunger strike.

As a result of having gone long periods being denied water, I became unable to drink and keep fluids down (each time I tried to drink fluids I'd throw them back up), and had to be rushed to the ER eleven times for IV hydration. Many times I was so dehydrated as a result, the prison and hospital medical staff couldn't locate or insert IV needles in my veins using 'normal' methods.

VDOC GOES FROM FROM STONEWALLING TO SETTLING

Numerous ranking VDOC HQ administrators visited me at SFI to assure me that they would not relent under our protests. My strike persisted.

On Feb 5, 2024 attorneys acting on my behalf filed a federal lawsuit against VDOC officials concerning my strike, my retaliatory transfer to ROSP, my need of care at major medical facilities unavailable in the VDOC's western region, and other related matters. After several hearings and VDOC stonewalling, it became clear that I was pushing the strike to the extreme and would not relent. State officials admitted fearing the political consequences of me dying from the strike. It was then agreed to move me to a medium security prison in the VDOC's central region where I was near my loved ones and major medical facilities. Meantime the matter of the VDOC's continued abuse of solitary confinement at ROSP and WRSP was set for trial in federal court beginning in mid-March 2024 with the court having already ruled the status illegal. With our/my hunger strike demands having been largely satisfied, I thus ended my strike

on Mar 5, 2024. I'd gone 2 1/2 months (71 days) without any food, days on end without drinking, and had lost 70 pounds.

My recovery however defied 'professional' expectations.

Since resuming eating and 'normal' fluid intake I have experienced none of the complications that medical professionals anticipated after having gone so long without nutrition and little fluids.

TRIBUTE TO PEOPLE POWER

Both I and others who participated into the strike received huge support from the public and devoted supporters, advocates, and loved ones, for which I am humbled and grateful.

Thank you to everyone who lent their protest efforts, voices, energy and support to our struggle. You were my inspiration and strength and the source of my success. Only because you all dared to struggle along with us have we dared to win!

All Power to the People!

Endnotes:

Va Code section 53.1-39.2 (Restorative housing; restrictions on use)