

Michigan Prisoners Rise Up! Overcrowded and Underfunded State Prisons Spawn Resistance

By Rand Gould

“The everyday activity of slaves reproduces slavery. Through their daily activities, slaves do not merely reproduce themselves and their masters, physically; they also reproduce the instruments with which the master represses them, and their own habits of submission to the master’s authority.”

Fredy Perlman, “The Reproduction of Daily Life” (1969)

Not since the 1980s, when the State of Michigan simultaneously ratcheted up “tough on crime” laws and eliminated good time credits that reduced the time served before parole eligibility, have Michigan’s prisons been so overcrowded and seething so much discontent. Overcrowded, underfunded, and understaffed, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) is struggling to provide housing, food, medical care, and programming for approximately 43,000 prisoners, within a \$2.1 billion per year budget that has not changed significantly this century despite multiple prison closures and the privatization of medical care, food service, and commissary. Moreover, the MDOC’s budget is unlikely to increase in the future due to the massive tax cuts (over \$2 billion) made by Gov. Snyder, which were a giveaway to the big corporations that continue to move manufacturing operations out of the state, if not the country, eliminating decent paying jobs which, in turn, causes at least a dozen families a day to pack-up and leave this “right-to-work-for-less” state. The only one in this country with a declining population.

Couple all this with the looting of city and public school system budgets by “too-big-to-fail” transnational financial corporations and banks, via the creation of massive debt under the aegis of Gov. Snyder’s “Financial Managers,” resulting in bankruptcies, as has occurred in Detroit, Flint, Benton Harbor, et al. (all unsurprisingly majority black cities) with the attendant crumbling of infrastructure, roads, and water systems, and Michigan is facing a disaster of epic proportions that reaches way beyond economics into the daily life of its people. It has been estimated that the Flint water disaster will cost the state over \$2 billion, courtesy of Gov. Snyder and his “Financial Managers” ill-considered attempt to save a few million dollars by disconnecting from Detroit’s water system, one of the best in the country, in order to pump toxic water from the GM-polluted Flint River into people’s homes. An act easily constructed as a form of genocide against Flint’s black-majority, and overwhelmingly poor, population. That \$2 billion us money that will never be available to MDOC, road repair, or anything else. And neither will the money Gov. Snyder is pending on his legal defense for causing this disaster of epic proportions!

This year after decades of passivity, Michigan prisoners are rising up and actively resisting their oppression. The inevitable “chicken is coming home to roost” in a prison system that operates as a human warehouse, offering few programming opportunities (none for lifers), whether teaching, job skills, or rehabilitation, and fewer job opportunities at the slave wages of \$0.84 - \$1.14 per day for most prisoners that are employed. Wages that have not increased in decades but have decreased when performance bonuses were taken from food service and Michigan State Industries (MSI) workers, while the quality and quantity of food served to prisoners has declined precipitously and commissary prices have skyrocketed due to privatization. Overcrowding, underfunding, understaffing, slave wages, high commissary prices, high phone rates, less food, with what is served obviously nutritionally deficient (e.g. less than a cup of vegetables a day, when USDA guidelines recommend 2 ½ cups), lack of programming, and poor medical care, are all the ingredients necessary in a recipe for disaster.

Consequently, it was no surprise when on March 20th and 21st, over 1,000 out of 1,300 prisoners, crammed into Kinross Correctional Facility’s four polebarns, refused meals and demonstrated in the yard. Or when on March 26th through 28th over 1,100 out of 1,300 prisoners crammed into Chippewa Correctional facility’s four polebarns also refused the meals provided by Trinity, the private food service contractor. These actions were followed on April 12th when 600 prisoners at Cotton Correctional Facility refused meals and on May 24th when 700 out of 1,100 Level 1 prisoners refused meals at Marquette Branch prison.

On September 9th, the 45th anniversary of the Attica State prison rebellion., prisoners at Kinross CF answered the Free Alabama Movement’s call for a nationwide prisoner labor strike by refusing to work, primarily, in the kitchen where most of the slave jobs are. This writer does not know if prisoners struck at other Michigan prisons on this day, but a strike at even one is a start. Reports indicate that on September 9th prisoners struck in Alabama, California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and at least eight other states. No doubt there were more that remain unreported.

There were hundreds of solidarity events across the country too. Supporters in multiple cities in Michigan made a ruckus to draw attention to the prison strike and to demonstrate that they are willing to throw down to support the prison rebels in their fight against inhumane conditions. In Lansing, Michigan, a crew got rowdy and blocked the main street with a 30 foot truck while holding banners and chanting anti-prison slogans. When they were chased off the first spot by the police they relocated about a mile down the street and did the whole stunt again, handing out hundreds of flyers to passerby. Perhaps some of the people stuck in traffic will now recognize the feeling of being powerless and potentially draw connections to the prison culture that our society supports.

<https://interrupt.noblogs.org/post/2016/09/19/lansing-group-blocks-rush-hour>

[traffic-to-support-nationwide-prisoner-strike/](#)). And in Detroit a group of 150 people staged a noise demo outside of a jail and received the enthusiastic support of those incarcerated on the inside as they enthusiastically banged on their windows. (<http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2016/09/09/downtown-protest-tonight-supports-nationwide-prison-strike>)

The administration's response at Kinross CF in Michigan was to serve "sack lunches" at every meal, consisting of a couple of cold sandwiches and a piece of fruit in a paper bag. Most of these sack lunches were prepared in the kitchens of nearby Chippewa CF by prisoners who did not strike. If they had, this strike action would have been so crippling that Gov. Snyder would have had to declare a state of emergency and call out the National Guard just to feed the striking prisoners.

On September 10th, after a day of eating sack lunches at every meal, 400 prisoners went out on the yard to voice their demand to be served the hot meals required by policy and to march peacefully in protest. In response, the MDOC mobilized several hundred correction and state police officers from across the state in order to suppress this peaceful demonstration. These officers ordered the 400 prisoners to return to their units, which they did peacefully, only to be ordered back out of their units and separated into groups from which 150 so-called "agitators" were picked out for immediate pack-up and transfer in retaliation for striking. At some point, all hell broke loose and two of eight units in the four polebarns were rendered uninhabitable, with sinks smashed, fires set, and a window broken, according to an MDOC spokesperson, who had initially and repeatedly stated the strike and subsequent demonstration on the yard were peaceful, while correction officers' union spokespersons had stated it was a violent riot from the beginning, as reported by CBC 9&10 News and other local media. Despite this seeming contradiction,, common sense dictates that it's more likely the officers rioted, turning a peaceful protest into a riot of destruction via their propensity for brutality. As on the streets, so in prison. Fortunately, no one was hurt (according to the reports).

So what's next for Michigan's prisoners and the MDOC? Likely, more of the same until the MDOC alleviates the overcrowding and provides decent housing, food, medical care, programming, and wages to prisoners. The first step toward achieving these goals requires the MDOC to cease operating its prisons at, or near, 200% of capacity. Both Kinross and Chippewa CFs consist of 4 polebarns divided into 8 units housing 160 men each in 8-man cubes designed for 4 men. This means there is only 10 square feet of unencumbered floor space for each man, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture rules require a minimum of 25.1 square feet for apes weighing over 55 pounds. See 56FR6426, 9CFR380(b)(2)(i)(n.4). With 8 men housed in cubes built for 4 and 2 men housed in cells built for one, there are double the amount of prisoners using the yards, dayrooms, chowhalls, bathrooms, showers, etc., than these facilities were designed for. Michigan's women prisoners have it even worse. Crammed into overcrowded prisons, underfed, denied proper medical care and programming, while forced to work for declining slave wages and subject

to rising commissary prices, no wonder Michigan prisoners are finally rising up! The only question is, why did it take them so long?

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