

SRJ Post-Strike Update:

SANTA RITA JAIL CONDITIONS WORSEN IN AFTERMATH OF WORKERS' STRIKE AMID DENIALS AND RETALIATION FROM SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND ALAMEDA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Three weeks after a weeklong work stoppage and hunger strike inside Santa Rita Jail, conditions inside the Dublin, California facility have worsened and prisoners are suffering retaliation for their actions. Demands issued by prisoners — many of which detailed basic needs such as cleaning supplies and regular meals — remain unaddressed. Spokespeople for the Sheriff's Office and the Alameda County Board of Supervisors have publicly denied that conditions inside the jail are at a "crisis level" in the aftermath of the strike.

The strike mobilized nearly four hundred prisoners to refuse meals, commissary, and work assignments from October 30 until the following Tuesday, November 3. In a display of political unity and discipline, prisoners collectively agreed on this set of tactics and delivered a comprehensive statement regarding their conditions; as well as a list of demands, which included regular access to cleaning supplies, regular meal times, more nutritious food, lower commissary prices, and more time out of their cells.

The strike began in Housing Unit 31 shortly after a man died on Saturday, October 26. Although statements from inside indicate that prisoners had already been planning a peaceful protest against jail conditions, the circumstances of the young man's death only exacerbated inmates' sentiments that jail conditions are unacceptable. While the Sheriff's Office claims that the man died after snorting drugs and was administered Narcan, detainees allege that the man was in serious medical distress after experiencing a seizure that caused him to fall from his bunk. Detainees called for help, but medical assistance did not arrive for at least half an hour, at which point the man's cellmates were moved to the yard "so that there would be no witnesses."

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights reports that Alameda County prisoners die at a rate of 13.6 per 1000 people, over 50% higher than in Los Angeles County, which has the largest jail system in the world. This in-custody death would be the tenth this year, and the 43rd in the last 5 years, a statistic that supports Santa Rita's reputation as one of the deadliest jails in the state. Community organizers suspect that in reality these numbers could be even higher due to underreporting of prisoner deaths. This is made possible by a policy that does not classify deaths that occur after release or in a hospital as "in-custody," even if a prisoner was injured or became ill while incarcerated.

As soon as the strike began, the jail responded quickly and decisively to suppress collective action by prisoners. Individuals suspected of organizing the strike were transferred into different housing units, often from general population to the maximum security unit, to prevent them from communicating with one another. One individual, who drafted a statement on behalf of striking prisoners, was immediately transferred to Marin County Jail. After the first day of the work stoppage, all kitchen, laundry, ITR (booking), and pod workers who refused to report to work were fired from their jobs. Housing units that participated by refusing their trays were placed on lockdown. Workers who lost their jobs have since written a letter to the kitchen deputy asking for their jobs back, but received no response.

This aggressive response to peaceful protest by prisoners is partially motivated by the jail's attempts to maintain control over inmates, but also motivated by a for-profit contract between Santa Rita Jail and Aramark Correctional Services, LLC. Prisoners employed by Aramark work in the kitchen's scullery, warehouse, and food production line under the supervision of Sheriff's deputies and Aramark employees. None of the prisoners are paid for their work. The large industrial kitchen supplies food both for Santa Rita and for other Bay Area jails. With a production quota to meet, and unwilling to negotiate with striking workers, Sheriff's deputies forced women prisoners and protective custody inmates to work all kitchen shifts. Attorneys charge that intimidation, threats, and unpaid labor of detainees both before and during the workers' strike violate California labor code, the Equal Pay Act, and the US Constitution.

Santa Rita spokesperson Sgt. Ray Kelly has issued several statements which deny reports of poor conditions, neglect, abuse and retaliation inside the jail. Labor inside Santa Rita "is completely on a volunteer basis," he said to KTVU on November 21. Sgt. Kelly also denies that the jail is retaliating against prisoners. In an interview with *The Appeal*, he stated that women prisoners "stepped up and came forward" during the strike. "They were very helpful to us when the labor strike occurred... We did not single them out in any way. As a matter of fact, it was the opposite. We were really happy that they came in."

On November 11th and November 20th, two federal civil rights lawsuits were filed against the Alameda County Sheriff's Office by two classes of plaintiffs who are currently or recently incarcerated at Santa Rita Jail. These complaints are intended to apply additional pressure to the jail to improve conditions which violate prisoners' constitutional rights and endanger their health. *Ruelas v. Alameda County*, filed November 20th, confirms that "Sheriff's deputies threaten plaintiffs and other prisoner employees of Aramark that if they refuse to work, they will receive longer jail sentences or be sent to solitary confinement, where they would be confined to a small cell for 22 to 24 hours a day."

The lawsuit also contends that the jail's contract with Aramark Correctional violates the 13th Amendment. Attorneys contend that the Sheriff's Office knows or should have known that they are providing uncompensated labor in violation of state and federal law. The complaint confirms that the Sheriff's deputies threatened to terminate prisoners' employment if they are sick or

injured, and that many prisoners were also threatened with 30 days additional jail time if they participated in the strike.

Gonzales v. Alameda County Sheriff's Office, filed on November 11th, denounces inhumane and unsanitary jail conditions, price gouging, and neglect by the jail's health provider, California Forensic Medical Group. The Alameda County Sheriff's Office is already a defendant in a number of lawsuits concerning sleep deprivation, abuse of pregnant women, and punitive isolation of people with mental illness and disabilities.

Along with the Sheriff's department, the Board of Supervisors has been similarly unwilling to address the strike, prisoners' demands, or hold the jail accountable for in-custody deaths. During the Board's Public Protection meeting on November 14th, community members and organizations voiced their concerns about jail conditions, retaliation against striking prisoners, and in-custody deaths, advocating for a complete audit, (financial and performance audit), of the Sheriff's Office and administration of Santa Rita Jail.

The Board responded that they view an audit as an unnecessary "parallel process." Supervisors claimed that the courts have a greater ability to influence Santa Rita's policy, conditions, and budget through the many ongoing lawsuits against the Sheriff's Office. Supervisor Scott Haggerty (District 1) voted "no" on the audit outright, while Public Protection Committee Chair Supervisor Richard Valle (District 2) claimed that he needed more time and information to consider the proposal, thus preventing the audit from moving forward to the full Board of Supervisors for a vote. Valle pledged to make 1-2 trips to the jail per month, but offered no substantive measures to address jail conditions.

Community advocates, including the Audit Ahern Coalition, the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee – Oakland, and lawyers representing inmates of the jail, believe that the Board is abdicating their responsibility to oversee the jail's practices and use of public funds. These poor conditions have led to multiple costly civil rights lawsuits, and these same lawsuits are now ironically being used to argue that a full investigation into the use of funds and conditions would be politically and financially infeasible. Attorney Yolanda Huang denounced a "culture of cruelty" within Santa Rita Jail which the county would rather obscure through costly settlements than take action to address often life-or-death conditions affecting inmates on a daily basis.

Members of the Audit Ahern coalition and other community advocates in attendance were both outraged and disappointed by the Board's response. They pointed to the fact that no ruling or settlement will lead to full transparency regarding the Sheriff's budget, which has reached nearly half a billion dollars per year. Community advocates also expressed that more urgent solutions are needed, as litigation of the pending civil rights claims could take months or years.

"Over 300 prisoners went on strike asking for basic dignity," said José Bernal, an organizer with the Audit Ahern coalition. "Santa Rita Jail is a very dangerous, dangerous place."