

Resistance to Prison Pay Cuts: An Account of Accountability

Jarrood Shook, Collins Bay Institution

May 9, 2012:
Claiming that “criminals have all the rights,” Public Safety Minister Vic Toews announces 30% 'accommodation tax' on inmate pay, capped at \$6.90 per day and eliminating \$2.20/hour incentive pay for CORCAN jobs.

Summer 2013:
'Consultation' with inmate committees concludes with no changes made to the so-called 'accountability measures' introduced by the government. Inmate committees hire lawyers and begin planning a strategic co-ordinated response.

October 1:
Pay cuts officially take effect. Prisoners at several institutions in Ontario refuse to attend work or programs. A CBC national news story spreads word of the strike across the country.

October 3:
Inmates elsewhere in Ontario, New Brunswick, Quebec and Saskatchewan go on strike. CORCAN operations are completely shut down. CSC confirms that “work and program refusals are occurring sporadically across the country.” Public Safety Minister Steven Blaney calls the strike “offensive to hard working, law abiding Canadians.”

October 29:
Strike is officially put on hold as gesture of good faith to allow for negotiations. Some institutions decide to remain on strike. Prisoners file administrative grievances en masse.

November 20:
Deadline passes with no response from the government or CSC.

After the November 20th deadline:

Following that snub much of the moral interest in a continued work strike had waned ... some individuals were coerced into a return to work with the threat that striking could result in transfers to higher security; dismissal from programs; loss of privileges and jobs; disciplinary charges for being 'antagonistic' or 'inciting'; and adverse effects on parole applications.

As of March 2014, inmate committees across Canada continue to express interest in pursuing this matter through litigation as well as other creative means. If our response to this clearly unreasonable and highly political policy shift reveals anything it is the fact that we have gone to great lengths to demonstrate accountability by being reasonable, mature, and responsible as we approach our issue in a direct but fair way. It is a shame that this has seemed to have been overlooked. But we have not forgotten.

Despite the disappointment I have seen with our reasoned approach to this particular issue I would caution my reader to remember that there is nothing inevitable about this system. The Canadian criminal justice system serves a purportedly public function, it is therefore patently in the hands of the public to seize control of it and direct it as they see fit. If you are among the 62% of Canadians who did not endorse the Conservative brand of politics in the last election or of the 39% of the cynical and disenfranchised who opted out of the vote altogether maybe you might count yourself as one among the many in this ongoing struggle. We would certainly welcome your support. The prison is but one striking symbol in society of the chains that we all wear.

Note: This is an excerpt from a longer article available in its entirety online at epic.noblogs.org.

Letter to the Warden About Pay Cuts for Federal Inmates

A Concerned Citizen at Collins Bay Institution

It was in 1982 or so when we were first given anywhere from \$2.50 to \$6.90 per day for work around the prison, including as cleaners, tutors and students at the school, range reps and garbage men. Inmates were supposed to use the funds thus earned to buy the health care and hygiene items not provided by the institution, as well as pay for our cable, phone calls, stamps and stationary to keep in contact with loved ones. The money was also supposed to help us start over when we got out so that we were not put onto the street without resources. We have never had a raise in the 30 years we have been paid for our work, although the price of goods has increased quite a bit. We are told to save for when we get out, communicate with our support network outside often and regularly, and be “accountable” for the extra things we need like shampoo and Tylenol. It is thus ironic to see our pay cut as part of the Conservative’s “Accountability Measures”. While the government claims that we are now paying for “room and board” it is really just a pay cut, as the \$2.50-\$6.90/day already took that into account and that is why it is so low a pay rate. Lastly, the pay cut moves away from a system of positive reinforcement for good behaviour and hard work to one of punishment for those who deviate from the system.

I am lucky to have a broad, deep and secure support network that can easily make up for any shortfalls I may have due to the recent changes. I will never have to decide between deodorant, Tylenol, stamps and phone calls. My circumstances put me in a small minority within these walls, though, and I don't represent a typical case. I furthermore have no dependent children, unlike so many of my peers here. What I do have is staggering debt in the tens of thousands of dollars related to the costs of my legal defence. I also lost nearly everything I owned when I was arrested and had to quickly liquidate my apartment with the help of some family and friends. I think that in these last two considerations, those of incurred debt and the loss of material wealth, I am not alone at all, and most of the inmates of Correctional Service Canada have undergone the same difficulties during their time in the judicial system. It is thus even harder for us to start over when we are released.

Many of us have limited financial support available on the outside upon our releases, especially since the Province has drastically reduced the amount of the Social Assistance “Start Up” funding available. It is thus perhaps a good idea that the Ministry ensure that a certain minimum resource be created prior to reintroduction to society. One must also consider the fact that a number of inmates rely on the money in their savings account for use on the inmate financed phone system or to transfer down to canteen accounts to help pay for incidentals such as hygiene and postage.

The proposed increase of the minimum inmate savings level from \$80 to \$200 in January will mean that a number of inmates will have to come up with an additional \$120, either by months and months of labour at the newly reduced rates, or by the generosity of people on the outside who may already feel the pinch of having to support the wage shortfall of someone here before they can use the money in their savings accounts. Either way, someone must provide \$120 before funding for communication expenses can be accessed. This measure acts as an added punishment on the poor inmates who have less community support to send money in to help cover the communication costs for phone and postage that we are responsible for. It is shameful that the government is putting in place what amounts to a \$120 tax on fathers talking to their kids, payable by people earning much less than minimum wage or by a class of women operating as single mothers. It amounts to a \$120 tax on the poor.

Note: This is an excerpt from a longer letter available in its entirety online at epic.noblogs.org.

Over The Wall is a brand new newsletter about strikes, actions, and struggles going on inside or around Ontario prisons. The purpose of this newsletter is to share information about prison issues and prison-related actions with supporters and potential supporters on the outside.

If you have a story or article that you'd like us to include next time, or if you'd like to sign up to receive the newsletter by mail, email epic@riseup.net

or write to: EPIC, 427 Princess St., Suite 409, Kingston, ON K7L 5S9

People on the outside who sign up to receive the newsletter by mail will also receive a small package of EPIC's most recent zines and publications.

Support the Tyendinaga Arrestees!

On March 8, following a week of action demanding a national inquiry into the at least 825 missing and murdered indigenous women across Canada, warriors from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory blocked the CN mainline. This action, which fell on International Women’s Day, came the day after the release of a Parliamentary report which attempted to dismiss and deny the crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women and prevent any meaningful response or action. This is a continuation of colonization and its inherent violence against Indigenous communities, particularly Indigenous women.

During the rail blockade, Shawn Brant, Matt Doreen, and Marc Baille were arrested and are facing charges ranging from mischief for blocking the tracks and blocking a road to assault police, and possession of weapons. Steve Chartrand was arrested on the Thursday following the blockade on charges of mischief. Stacey Boots was arrested for mischief on March 22nd immediately preceding a planned occupation of a former customs house on Akwesasne territory. Dan Doreen was arrested for mischief a few days later on March 25th.

Please consider donating what you can to support the arrestees and their families

Make cheques out to “Solidarité sans frontières” and write “Tyendinaga Support” in the memo line. Mail cheques to:
Solidarité sans frontières / Tyendinaga Support
1500 de Maisonneuve West, #204 Montréal, QC H3G 1N1
By paypal: visit www.solidarityacrossborders.org/en/donate (*please write a note to specify that it is for Tyendinaga)

Meanwhile, the Canadian government remains complicit in the murder and disappearances of hundreds of indigenous women. Actions to demand justice for these women, their families, and their communities are as important now as ever!

Migrant Strike in Lindsay Jail Continues

Over 191 undocumented migrants have been on strike in the Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, ON since September 17th. Several detained migrants were on hunger strike, including at least two who continued the hunger strike for over 60 days. Other prisoners have refused services, refused to enter their cells and refused to attend their detention review hearings – a sham process with virtually no hope of release being granted. Nearly 200 migrants restarted the hunger strike on December 13 with a 72-hour fast, timed to co-incide with a solidarity rally outside the Lindsay jail. Strike actions on the inside continue to this day.

Here is their list of demands:

- 1 – Freedom for the wrongly jailed: Release all migrant detainees who have been held for longer than 90 days.
- 2 – End arbitrary and indefinite detention: Implement a 90-day presumptive period. If removal cannot happen within 90 days, immigration detainees must be released. This is recommended by the United Nations, and is the law in the United States and the European Union.
- 3 – No maximum security holds: Immigration detainees should not be held in maximum security provincial jails. They must have access to basic services and be close to family members.
- 4 – Overhaul the adjudication process: Give migrants fair and full access to legal aid, bail programs and pro bono representation.

“The media is putting coverage on jail conditions. We are not fighting for jail conditions. We are fighting for our freedom, for our lives out there. We have family, we have kids in Canada that cannot see us because we have been detained for 28 months, 32 months. This is what we are fighting for. We could care less about the jail conditions. First of all, we shouldn’t be in jail never mind the condition. This is indefinite hold. This is illegal.” - Martin Sisay, hunger striker (released after 32 months in detention)

G20 Extraditees in Ontario

In February, three US activists who were extradited to Canada last year were sentenced for their activities at the G20 protests in Toronto 2010. Kevin Chianella plead guilty to 16 charges and was sentenced to 24 months in a penitentiary, Joel Bitar plead guilty to 12 counts of mischief over \$5000 and was sentenced to 20 months in a provincial jail, Richard Morano plead to 6 counts (originally facing 14) and is sentenced to 7 months in jail, \$3,000 in restitution and is banned from Toronto during his two-year probation.

From Joel's statement to the courts: "The current situation in the world is urgent and much needs to be done. I truly believe we can build a new system that puts human need and the needs of the environment ahead of the interests of business. At some point, we need to decide if profit, innovation and economic growth are more important than the long-term sustainability and well-being of our species and planet...These systems are antiquated and must be fundamentally transformed...I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my family, friends and supporters. This process has taken an incredible toll on myself and especially my loved ones. It means the world that they have stood by me through it all."

Those interested in reading more or supporting the extraditees should visit notorontog20extradition.wordpress.com.

Recent Anti-Prison Solidarity Actions

October 2, 2013: Flyering in Kingston, ON

EPIC and friends flyer the intersection in front of Collins Bay in solidarity with federal prisoners on strike contesting cuts to inmate pay and immigrant prisoners on hunger strike protesting their conditions and indefinite detention.

November 22, 2013: Banner drop in Kingston, ON

A banner reading “Prison Wages are Sweatshop Wages – Support Prisoners On Strike” is dropped over a highway overpass near the CORCAN headquarters/factory in Kingston.

December 14, 2013: End Immigration Detention rally in Lindsay, ON

Almost two hundred protesters gather with noisemakers and banners outside Lindsay Jail in the bitter cold for a co-ordinated solidarity rally with striking immigrant detainees to demand an end to indefinite detention.

December 31, 2013: NYE Noise Demo in Hamilton, ON

Sixty people shoot off fireworks outside of Barton St. Jail. Prisoners are seen banging on the windows and waving from both sides of the wall. Someone spray-paints the prison during the demo.

February 17, 2014: Family Day Projection Bomb in Toronto, ON and Banner Drop in Guelph, ON

A massive image that reads “We are wives and partners whose children look at their father's shoes and ask us...when will they return? End Immigration Detention” is projected onto border control offices in Toronto. A banner with the same image is dropped in Guelph.

February 28, 2014: Rally to End Immigration Detention and Enforcement in Toronto, ON

Protestors bang on office doors and leave a trail of posters taped to the walls of the Greater Toronto Enforcement Center, the largest immigration enforcement site in Canada responsible for immigration detention and over 40 deportations a day.

March 15, 2014: International Day Against Police Brutality Demo in Hamilton, ON

Close to 70 people take to the streets for Hamilton's first annual demonstration against police (brutality). Protesters light off firecrackers, chant anti-police slogans and do a lot of cathartic yelling at pigs.

