

[EMBARGOED UNTIL]: July 23, 2020 @ 5PM PDT

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Undocumented immigrants held in two different detention facilities host strikes, protesting inaction from state leaders as COVID-19 spreads

Immigrants launch a labor strike in Mesa Verde Detention Facility while those detained at Yuba County Jail lead a hunger strike in joint efforts to pressure state leaders to save lives

CALIFORNIA -- Detained undocumented immigrants at the Mesa Verde Detention Facility are leading a labor strike in response to news that a person transferred into the facility tested positive for COVID-19, after already having engaged in four hunger strikes in the past three months, warning of precisely this. Simultaneously, immigrants detained at Yuba County Jail are launching a hunger strike to protest grotesque conditions.

Two rallies in support of the strikers are being organized by community advocates in **Yuba County and Kern County, where Mesa Verde Detention Facility** sits. Rallies are set to commence **Thursday July 23rd at 8PM** outside of each facility.

Detained leaders at Mesa Verde announced the work stoppage in a statement to GEO Group and ICE: “Mesa Verde runs off of our labor. We are the ones who prepare and serve the food, who clean the bathrooms and the dorms. We are paid \$5 per week for our official jobs, and the rest we do for free. **We will not work and we will not collaborate with GEO. We refuse to make it easier for you to continue unnecessarily caging and murdering us.**”

At Yuba County Jail, those leading the strike held Sheriff Anderson Wendell and the Yuba County Board of Supervisors responsible for horrendous conditions. Yuba County Jail remains the last detention facility that holds immigrants after a series of county jails cancelled their contracts with ICE due to rising community pressure.

While mass release through humanitarian parole has been the main demand for the folks organizing inside Mesa Verde Detention Facility and Yuba County Jail, detained immigrants urgently demand that Governor Newsom and Attorney General Becerra:

1. **Stop transferring people** who are released from California custody into ICE detention centers;
2. **Halt the expansion of immigration detention facilities** in the state to prevent the needless transmission of COVID-19; and
3. **Immediately inspect all ICE facilities** in the state to oversee the standards of care in these facilities and independently investigate the deaths that have occurred there during the pandemic.

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“6.5 million dollars a year for the ICE contract,” [writes an anonymous detainee at Yuba County Jail](#) for the online publication Detention Digest. “[Y]et we can’t get adequate hygiene, decent clothes, a clean housing area, shoes to wear, exercise equipment, basic medical attention, not even a pillow!”

As COVID-19 spreads in detention facilities and prisons across the country, the urgency to pressure ICE, GEO, and all those with authority to free people from detention has sparked hunger strikes across the state. Those organizing the work stoppage at Mesa Verde say they’ve tried to get Governor Gavin Newsom’s attention since the start of the pandemic, but have been ignored, leaving them no choice but to escalate.

Governor Newsom has the power to stop the transfer of individuals during a pandemic, and to put pressure on ICE to release incarcerated individuals as prisons and jails become hotspots for outbreaks. With Yuba County Jail going on strike, **Every single detention facility in the state of California has now had organized resistance from inside pointing to the lack of an adequate response to COVID-19 from state leadership.**

Through the work-stoppage and hunger strike, detained leaders also demand that ICE, GEO, and the Yuba County Sheriff immediately:

1. **Repair their bathrooms, and clean and sanitize their dorms** regularly;
2. Provide **free, high-quality hygiene supplies**;
3. Require **all staff to wear masks and gloves** at all times;
4. Provide adequate and timely **medical care**, not just ibuprofen;
5. Provide **clean masks and laundry**;
6. **Reduce exorbitant commissary prices** so that they can buy the supplies they need for their wellbeing;
7. **Serve fresh, nutritious food**, including fruit, vegetables, real meat, vegetarian options (not only for religious reasons), and larger portions;
8. Allow for **consistent, affordable access to tablets** at the Mesa Verde Detention Facility so that they can communicate with their families and the outside world;
9. **Reduce the exorbitant cost of phone calls** at the Yuba County Jail so that they can communicate with their families and the outside world;
10. Provide **better quality shoes, clothing, and bedding**;
11. Provide productive **stress outlets** (like punching bags in the recreation yard, art classes, and regular religious services) and **self-help programs** (like AA, NA, ESL, vocational training and GED classes) for their mental health;
12. Pay **fair wages** for their work; and
13. **Cease all retaliation** from guards, including excessive and arbitrary write-ups and the practice of placing in solitary confinement those who exercise their First Amendment right to freedom of speech.

Though the campaign to #FreeThemAll has successfully fought for the release of many inside of Mesa Verde and Yuba County Jail, advocates inside the facilities argue that social distancing is still impossible

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and that staff is not taking the necessary precautions, including wearing PPE. Strikers hope that their protests will help them remain safe amidst multiple reports of COVID-19 inside.

ICE systematically deprives tens of thousands of immigrants of liberty each day, with rampant medical neglect. In ICE detention, like other forms of incarceration, people are kept in closely together by design, making distancing impossible. Across the country, communities are organizing to replace immigration detention with a system of community-based case management. Studies prove this works better than the current harsh approach of detention.

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