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Coronavirus pandemic: Remove prisoners from these death cells!

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FREE THEM ALL!



**ALL PEOPLE IN JAILS, PRISONS, SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
AND MIGRANT DETENTION.**

It appears that the U.S. government — headed by Donald Trump and enabled by Democrats who refuse to seriously check the most egregious actions of this fascist-minded, racist and sexist president — is using the coronavirus crisis to erode any democratic rights under capitalism that haven't already been wiped out by law.

In addition to the economic and health insecurity that Covid-19 is exacerbating for working and poor people, the Department of Justice has already asked Congress to allow indefinite incarceration without trial. And to deny asylum to any immigrant testing positive for the virus — a death threat to many immigrants escaping the chaos produced by the devastation of their countries of origin and the hijacking of their country's political process by Washington and Wall Street.

[According to Politico](#), this request from Attorney General William Barr referred to “any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil processes and proceedings.”

This is the exact opposite of what the scientific community, human and civil rights organizations and public defenders are saying is needed to help fight the spread of the virus. Prisons and detention centers are incubators for disease. These institutions have now been transformed into death rows for all incarcerated or detained people.

Prison conditions in the U.S. have always been inhumane, with hygiene facilities and medical care dangerously lacking, encouraging sickness and death. However, these conditions are now far more dangerous — with facilities refusing soap and running water, and no possibility for social distancing during this crisis.

Crisis in Cumberland prison

Calling for solidarity and support, many of those incarcerated at North Branch

Correctional Facility in Cumberland, Md., have contacted activists with the Peoples Power Assembly in Baltimore regarding conditions within the prison amidst the deadly pandemic.

One prisoner, James Young III, who has been incarcerated at NBCI for almost seven years, has been experiencing severe symptoms typical of confirmed Covid-19 cases for over a week. James suffers from fever, chills and respiratory distress. Correctional officers stationed at the prison have consistently denied James entrance to the prison's infirmary.

Through a friend inside the prison, James communicated: "Yeah man, I haven't been given any medicine or treatment. They won't even let me have soap. They have just been keeping me in my cell as I feel worse and worse."

Attorney and PPA organizer Alec Summerfeld spoke by phone with Terrance Mahogany, who is in the cell next to James. He stated: "I am experiencing the same symptoms as James. It is getting real bad in here. The prison is making sure the guards have masks, soap, hand sanitizer and everything else ... but not us."

Mahogany continued: "They don't care about the inmates. We can't get any treatment. No handwashing stations, no shower access, no nothing. We are just being left in our cells to suffer."

'Land of the free': the prisonhouse of nations

Prisoners and detainees in the U.S. remain isolated and invisible. The inhumane conditions of animals in zoos are covered much more by the corporate media than the conditions of human beings in a country that has, by far, the greatest number of residents behind bars.

As of 2015, over 2 million people are incarcerated. That's nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population. By comparison, China, with a population three times larger than the

U.S., not only holds a much lower percentage of its population as prisoners — less than .2 percent — but the actual number is nearly [650,000 less](#) than in the U.S._

Most pertinent to the dangers of Covid-19 is the overcrowding or occupancy level in U.S. prisons. That rate is also much higher than most countries. U.S. prisoners are crammed into cells at over 100 percent capacity.

On April 7, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the [Oakdale Federal Detention Center](#) in Louisiana after five people died there. The ACLU is demanding that the Federal Bureau of Prisons release prisoners who are at high risk from the virus.

So far, Attorney General Barr has ignored countless requests that he begin depopulating prisons in earnest to prevent the mass killing of prisoners and detainees through neglect during this viral crisis.

This is why Lisa Freeland, federal public defender for the Western District of Pennsylvania and co-chair of the Defender Services Advisory Group to the U.S. courts; David Patton, executive director and attorney in chief of the Federal Defenders of New York; and Jon Sands, federal public defender for the District of Arizona, wrote an opinion piece in the Washington Post on April 6 warning Barr of the life-and-death consequences of his continued inaction.

They point out: “The number of Covid-19 cases in the Bureau of Prisons are rising exponentially, at a pace far surpassing the U.S. population at large. On March 20, the bureau’s website reported just two Covid-19-positive inmates and staff; two weeks later, it reported 174 confirmed cases. **That’s an increase of 8,600 percent** [my emphasis – jp], a much steeper rate of increase than has been recorded among the general population. And because testing has been grossly insufficient, these numbers are almost certainly an undercount.”

Refuting the argument that prisoners would be better off staying in prison, they

argue that not only is this a death sentence for the incarcerated, but the ramifications of incubating the virus in this huge population will adversely affect the general population, far more than if the number of prisoners was drastically reduced.

Freeland, Patton and Sands go on to mention the obstruction to releasing prisoners by prosecutors, judges and Barr himself:

“It is too late for the crisis to be entirely averted, but the worst can be prevented if Congress and Attorney General William P. Barr act with urgency. So far, however, Barr and federal prosecutors have opposed even modest efforts to reduce the prison population. In courtrooms across the country, when lawyers seek bail or compassionate release for vulnerable people accused or convicted of nonviolent offenses, federal prosecutors have vigorously opposed the requests — even in cases where people’s sentences are near completion. In nearly every case, prosecutors are making the same argument that Barr advanced in a recent statement: that inmates are safer in prison than they would be at home.

“It is an absurd claim, contradicted by science and fact. The CDC’s guidance is unequivocal: social distancing, hand-washing and cleanliness are key to reducing spread of the coronavirus. Numerous credible public health experts have observed that overcrowded prisons with communal living; shared toilets, showers, and sinks; poor sanitation; and wholly inadequate medical care would allow Covid-19 to sweep through the prison population far more quickly than the general public — with devastating consequences.”

Free them all!

According to public defenders, Barr has the authority to do what is necessary with the additional powers given to him by the passage of the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) in March.

The solution of the problem does not require rocket science or resources that the U.S. lacks. However, this capitalist government and politicians bought and paid for by the monopolies would rather commit mass murder in the prisons than use the trillions of dollars earmarked for the military or to bail out Big Business.

Iran has already released over 85,000 prisoners to save them from the virus. Instead of following Iran's example, the U.S. continues to enforce sanctions that greatly limit the Iranian government's ability to deal with the pandemic. U.S. sanctions apply to Cuba, Zimbabwe, Venezuela and many other countries trying to deal with this crisis, In the case of Cuba, Venezuela and China, these countries are also actively engaged in assisting many other countries in combating this threat to humanity.

There's not much to figure out here. Of course, housing, health care and other facilities to house those who are a danger to themselves or others will have to be provided to those who are released. The U.S. has the resources and ability to do that — if only profits were not priority number one.

The details of care for released prisoners cannot be used as an excuse today to delay or refuse their release, which amounts to practicing genocide against our human family members who are now being further tortured and falling as casualties in the war on working-class, poor and oppressed people here in the belly of the beast.

It will take a united and militant movement to change this deadly direction of inaction.

