

NEWS ANALYSIS |

## Hunger Strike at Menard Correctional Center Draws Solidarity, Support

Activists are supporting the prisoners at Illinoisu2019 Menard Correctional Facility who have been on hunger strike since January 15 to protest their conditions of confinement.

By James Anderson, TRUTHOUT  
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**A**bout 15 prisoners in the High Security Unit at Menard Correctional Facility in Chester, Illinois, have been on hunger strike since January 15, 2014, to protest their placement and conditions of confinement.

When the Tamms Correctional Center [closed its doors](https://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/7/headlines#1713) [. \(https://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/7/headlines#1713\)](https://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/7/headlines#1713) after activists campaigned against the harsh conditions and prolonged solitary confinement at the former “supermax” facility in Illinois, many prisoners were transferred to Menard.

Upon transfer, men have been kept in administrative detention in the High Security Unit. The men must now complete a nine-month, three-phase program to regain privileges they did nothing to forfeit in the first place.

Once the hunger strike was declared, prisoners reported officers shaking down their cells and sending those refusing food to the medical staff.

Upon return, officers pushed, cuffed, slammed, stomped and kicked prisoner Armando Velasquez, according to letters from hunger strikers at Menard received by attorney Alice Lynd, who is helping with legal work on the case. Velasquez, who, according to the [Illinois Department of Corrections website](https://www2.illinois.gov/IDOC/OFFENDER/Pages/InmateSearch.aspx) [. \(https://www2.illinois.gov/IDOC/OFFENDER/Pages/InmateSearch.aspx\)](https://www2.illinois.gov/IDOC/OFFENDER/Pages/InmateSearch.aspx), turned 28 on Jan. 20, has not been seen since being moved to the Health Care Unit.

“It is of course troubling that among the prisoners there, the Health Care Unit signifies not somewhere you go to get help, but somewhere that doesn’t have a surveillance camera and where the staff can really give you a going over,”

[Stoughton Lynd](https://zinnedproject.org/2013/11/forever-young-staughton-lynd/?utm_source=Defending+People%27s+History+%7C+Sec+You+in+St.+Louis+%7C+Howard+Zinn%2C+Presente&utm_campaign=ZEP+-+July+4+2013&utm_medium=email) [. \(https://zinnedproject.org/2013/11/forever-young-staughton-lynd/?utm\\_source=Defending+People%27s+History+%7C+Sec+You+in+St.+Louis+%7C+Howard+Zinn%2C+Presente&utm\\_campaign=ZEP+-+July+4+2013&utm\\_medium=email\)](https://zinnedproject.org/2013/11/forever-young-staughton-lynd/?utm_source=Defending+People%27s+History+%7C+Sec+You+in+St.+Louis+%7C+Howard+Zinn%2C+Presente&utm_campaign=ZEP+-+July+4+2013&utm_medium=email) said in a phone interview.

Stoughton Lynd, a long-time labor, anti-war and civil rights activist who helped coordinate the 1964 Freedom Schools in Mississippi, said he and his wife got involved because prisoners sought their help.

“So when we heard that these folks have been placed in administrative detention at Menard with no notice, no

rationale and no hearing, we felt fairly confident in saying that this is wrong,” he said.

Prior to the hunger strike, prisoners filed grievances regarding the conditions in the unit.

In one pre-strike grievance obtained by Alice Lynd, a prisoner stated that cells had been without hot water for 48 days.

“So cold cell and only cold water,” the prisoner wrote on the IDOC grievance form dated Dec. 17. “This is the definition of torture. What’s next waterboarding during A.D. hearing if we ever get one[?] Essentially I’m in a condemned cell.”

Alan Mills, the Uptown People’s Law Center attorney who represents men at Menard, provided the prison administration with a list of 10 prisoner requests that prompted the hunger strike.

In addition to adequate heat and water, prisoners asked for reasonable access to cleaning supplies and for the rodent-vermin infestation to be eliminated.

The Lynds indicated some of these issues are starting to be addressed.

“On the conditions of confinement, there have already been changes in the availability of sanitation supplies,” Staughton Lynd said.

He said through peaceful protest prisoners won the right to use individual exercise coats for the brief bouts of physical activity they are allowed.

The availability of disinfectant, mops and brooms to keep cells in livable conditions are some of the other “smaller issues they say there’s not only been a change promised, but it’s happened,” he said.

But there is much more that remains unacceptable to prisoners and supporters alike.

“They have not won hot water,” Staughton Lynd said. “They have not won more blankets. And obviously, those are desirable items with the weather we’ve been having. So I would say that there’s been some progress on the conditions front, but not as much as is needed.”

Pressure from protesting prisoners and from demonstrators on the outside – including a group of about 20 that showed up outside the Correctional Center on January 27 – likely spurred initial redress, Staughton Lynd said.

“Grievances did not produce results,” Alice Lynd said via email regarding the changes in confinement conditions. “The hunger strike and outside support presumably made the difference.”

Hunger-striking prisoners at Menard wrote that before police dispersed protesters January 27, the banging of homemade drums and waving of signs reading “We Support the Hunger Strike” made a difference.

“I do not know who those supporters were, but if you can find out please let them know we deeply appreciate their support,” wrote a prisoner in one of the letters. “Seeing them protest on our behalf was definitely a confidence booster. The psychological effect on the prisoners is beyond explanation.”

Prisoners noted that they opened their windows when they saw the show of solidarity outside, and shouted, “We love you!” – as well as, “No due process, no peace.”

Staughton Lynd said the outcome of a separate class-action suit against the Ohio State Penitentiary – a case he and his wife filed against the “supermax” in their hometown of Youngstown – illustrates emergent possibilities.

The Supreme Court decided in that case there needs to be some stated rationale for proposed administrative action before someone is placed in that sort of confinement.

Staughton Lynd added that “the final element of really minimal due process” entails the “right to appear in person before the people who propose to subject you to long-term solitary confinement [and] have them tell you face to face why they think they need to do this. And you need to have an opportunity to answer.”

When prisoners in Ohio went on hunger strike, they also won “semi-contact” visits, Staughton Lynd said, “and so men who had for 20 years not been able to embrace a young relative were able to do that.”

Historically hunger strikes usually end in a stalemate, Lynd said, because prison administrations refuse to negotiate when prisoners refuse food, and prisoners remain reluctant to trust the administration enough to start eating again before promises materialize. But the “rather modest changes” sought in Youngstown in early 2011 were realized.

“And because the demands were relatively modest – at least externally, I won’t say that the feeling of the men was modest; it was exuberant – but the important signal that sent to California was that once in a while you can win these things,” Staughton Lynd said in reference to the spirit of nonviolent resistance that made its way from Ohio to places like Pelican Bay prison in Crescent City, California.

Inmates, such as Todd Ashker, undertook protracted hunger strikes ([https://www.democracynow.org/2013/8/23/exclusive\\_as\\_judge oks\\_force\\_feeding](https://www.democracynow.org/2013/8/23/exclusive_as_judge oks_force_feeding)) in Pelican Bay last summer.

“The hunger strikers at Menard are picking up on the tactic,” Staughton Lynd said. “I have a feeling that this is becoming, so to speak, the standard operating procedure of high-security prisoners in the United States, of whom there are many, when they really want to protest an injustice.”

He said that when “prisoners go out of their way to protest nonviolently,” as they have in Ohio, California and Illinois, using the primary “strategy of choice that high-security prisoners have,” then the tragedy is that administrations often react irresponsibly.

A federal judge approved the force-feeding of prisoners on extended hunger strike in California in June 2013.

Force-feeding also has been a constant issue at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. Hip-hop artist Mos Def tried to show audiences (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/jul/08/mos-def-force-fed-guantanamo-bay-video>) the standard procedure for force-feeding detainees at Guantánamo but was unable to complete the demonstration because of the unbearable burning sensation caused by the tubes inserted deep in the nostrils, down into the throat.

Staughton Lynd said that although guards at Menard are reported to have threatened it, force feeding is “not really

imminent” – yet. The hunger strike has not gone on long enough for those measures to be taken. As time goes on, he said, he hopes “the Illinois authorities don’t rush into that and that some of the interchanges between the authorities and the men progress.”

“However, we have also researched and made available to the men the judgment of the American Medical Association, that as long as the prisoner is mentally competent, he or she has an absolute right – not under the law, but as a matter of medical ethics – to make an independent decision as to whether or not to accept force feeding,” Mr. Lynd added.

He said he suspects prisoners are now contemplating the pros and cons of continuing to refuse food. The prisoners likely are wondering, he said, whether the administration will follow through with improving conditions and providing a standard set of transparent rules. Or they are asking themselves, “Do we need to stay on hunger strike until that handbook materializes? And, for goodness sakes, how long is that likely to be?”

Staughton Lynd, whose forthcoming book, “Doing History from the Bottom Up,” will be published by Haymarket Books (<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/>) in Chicago, said he received a phone call February 3 from activists in Chicago planning a hunger fast in solidarity with prisoners at Menard.

This action occurs at the same time as activists are showing solidarity for the NATO 3 (<https://freethenato3.wordpress.com/nato-3-trial-solidarity/>), now on trial for charges of conspiracy, terrorism and arson assayed after Chicago police raided a Bridgeport neighborhood apartment just prior to the planned demonstrations against the NATO summit in the city in May 2012.

Prisoners in Southern Illinois and supporters are asking people to call or write the Menard Correctional Center Warden Rick Harrington (<https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/facilities/Pages/menardcorrectionalcenter.aspx>), and contact Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn (<https://org2.salsalabs.com/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=%2Fhz9BpUrV0Im9pskXTXdBfbijGaaXuxX>) to demand that no retaliation be taken against hunger strikers and to urge that the necessary changes be made regarding due process and conditions of confinement.

Recollecting his work in the 1960s – from organizing with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to assembling the Assembly of Unrepresented People – Lynd pointed out a parallel between that period and now which underscores the importance of what is happening at Menard.

Roughly speaking, the first half of the 1960s, he said, showcased nonviolent civil disobedience. The second half, Lynd said, witnessed the growth of a more militant current, with mixed results.

“I sense that that same struggle between nonviolence and something that at first glance seems more militant is also going on today,” he said. “And one reason I have such interest and respect for prisoner hunger strikes, why my wife and I have gone to some length in trying to assist the prisoners, is that it’s an essentially nonviolent alternative. And if it’s what the rest of us want to see in society as a whole ... if we want these protests to happen, but we want them to stay nonviolent, I think that the prisoners are giving us all a very important example – a very important demonstration under quite difficult conditions.”

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