

**For Immediate Release**

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## **With NWDC a "Tinderbox" for COVID-19 Outbreak, Detained People Begin Mass Hunger Strike to Highlight Their Plight**

*80+ People Refuse all Food amidst Coronavirus exposure fears*

Tacoma, WA - On Friday, March 27, 2020, thirty people caged at the infamous and medically negligent Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) began a hunger strike to call attention to their suffering and plight. Coronavirus infections and rates of death from COVID-19 continue to soar in Western Washington. Members of a single unit -- called a pod by NWDC -- began their hunger strike soon after a peer with COVID-19-like symptoms was seen vomiting while GEO guards removed him. (GEO Group is the private for-profit company that owns and runs this facility.) When those in the pod inquired about the individual's condition and whether he tested positive for the Coronavirus, GEO guards refused to answer. Only later did guards inform people that the person from their pod is now in a Tacoma-area hospital receiving intensive medical care.

Wracked with debilitating anxiety and fear that every day inside NWDC places their lives in danger, people detained have been forced to go on hunger strike to call attention to their inhumane treatment and the callousness of GEO and its employees during this pandemic. As one hunger striker who reached out to La Resistencia said, "We don't want to die. We are humans, not animals."

Hunger strikers vow to continue until ICE and GEO respond to their demands. Speaking to Mora-Villalpando by phone, they explained the urgency, "We want to be released because in here there's no protection from the virus...We are on hunger strike because we know it's not true that we will receive medical care here in NWDC. In our unit there are eighty people, at least seventy-five of us are on hunger strike today [Saturday, March 28, 2020]. Two other units have joined us with twenty to fifty people also on hunger strike." The strike is indefinite, continuing until the following demands are met: **1) Provide humanitarian temporary visa for those inside; 2) Reunite those detained with their families; 3) Stop all deportation and immigration proceedings until the pandemic has concluded.**

With brutal mistreatment and blatant disregard for hygiene or the sanitary conditions needed to stop the rampant spread of the virus among guards, staff, and those detained within the facility, more people in adjacent pods have joined the strike. As of March 28, a minimum of **eighty people** crowded in multiple pods across the 1,575-bed facility joined the hunger strike. With every passing hour, more people detained inside NWDC are learning of the strike and joining in.

Friday was only the most recent instance that those caged inside NWDC could have been exposed to the highly contagious and novel Coronavirus, with many others showing similar symptoms. Other people are sequestered in medical isolation in the NWDC, and people detained do not know if they have been tested for Covid-19. The facility is notorious for contagious outbreaks of mumps and varicella in the last three years.

Doctors from the US Department of Homeland Security described immigrant detention centers like the NWDC as "tinderboxes" that spark a terrible and rapid spread of the disease amongst people detained, guards, and the broader community. Undocumented advocate Maru Mora-Villalpando supports those hungering for their justice: "Speaking with family members of those detained inside, their hearts, like ours, are crushed that loved ones must risk hungering without end to draw attention to the unimaginable experiences those inside endure, including now being forced to await their infection from an incurable virus that is entirely preventable."

Hunger strikers already report that NWDC guards have threatened them, and others have detailed attempts by GEO employees to suppress any knowledge of the strike and especially of the escalating health crisis inside. The daughter of one hunger-striker, scheduled to graduate as a school teacher this June, describes her father's plight, "My dad has been detained for over seven months. He had a medical procedure recently and his immune system is weak. He's afraid of what could happen. He calls us every day and says if I don't call you one day, it is because something happened to me. He told us two people tried to call the radio stations yesterday to announce the strike, and guards revoked their communications privileges." ICE's lack of transparency and communication endangers people detained, traumatizes loved ones, and places all of our health at risk.

According to the Detention Watch Network, there are at least five other hunger strikes by detained people across the United States. Expressing their solidarity, one hunger striker put it this way: "I want to say to everyone else that they are not alone, you have all of us here, and we are not going to break... that we are with them, we are all in agreement on not eating. That we are united, to believe in God, to trust God, God is with us. That they should pray, they should ask their families to support us, that they speak up, that they should scream. We have a voice and a vote; we are not alone. We are united, united creating a single chain, this is a message to not give up. That more people join us every day, together we can achieve this. If someone breaks, the entire chain breaks. Come together, join us, you are not alone, we are united."

La Resistencia stands with today's hunger strikers and their demands. We call for ICE to immediately release all those who have been forced to risk their own welfare to reveal the conditions inside this abysmal facility to demand their freedom and a stoppage of all deportations and transfers in and out of the state.

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*La Resistencia (formerly known as NWDC Resistance) is a volunteer community group that emerged to fight deportations in 2014 at the now-infamous Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, WA. La Resistencia supports people detained in demanding an end to all detentions and deportations while bettering treatment and conditions.*