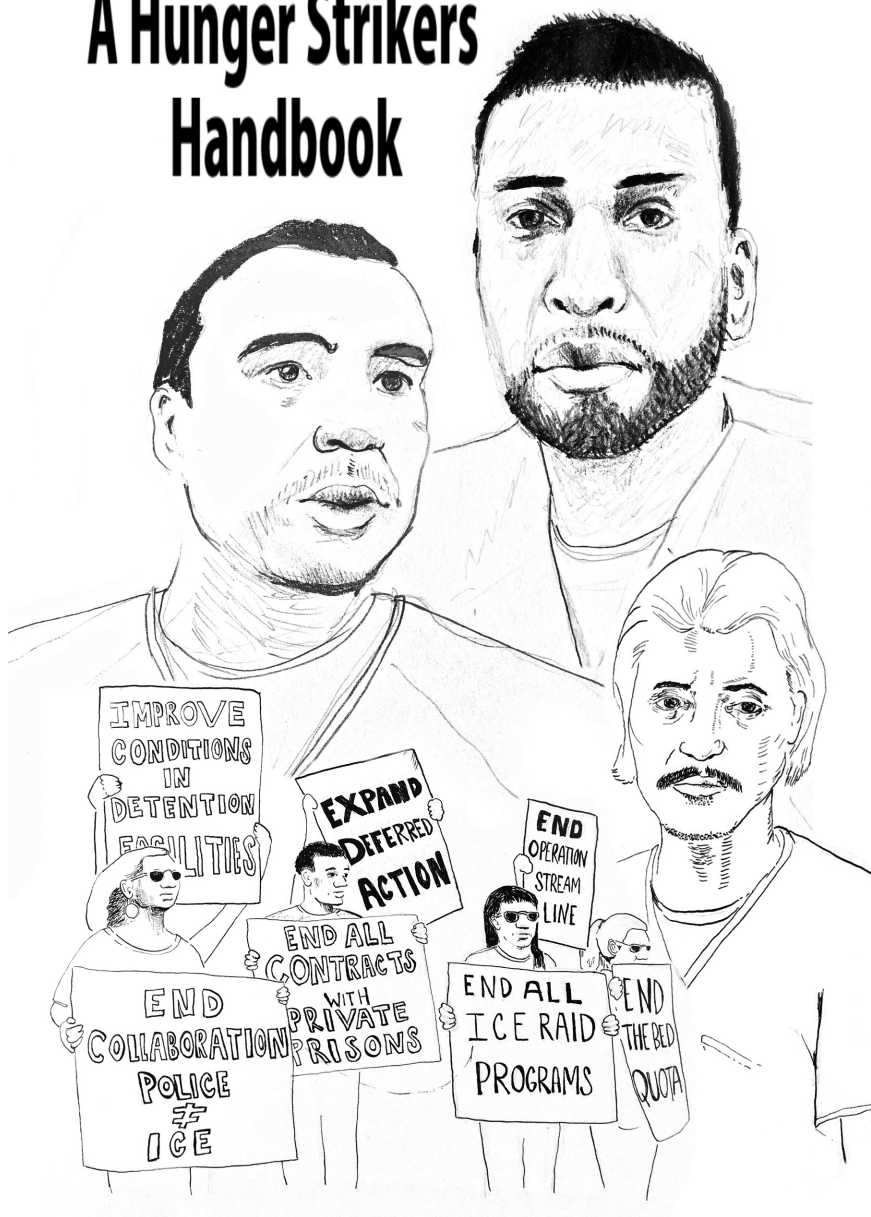


# A Hunger Strikers Handbook



# A Hunger Strikers

## H A N D B O O K

Written by the NWDC Resistance, including J. Cipriano  
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# Justice Means No More Cages

By Dean Spade

The history of imprisonment reveals that well-meaning reformers actually help prison systems grow and expand. When reformers opposed the fact that women, men and children were put in the same prisons, state officials invented women's and children's prisons — more women and children were sentenced to prison than ever before. When people oppose overcrowding, governments build more prisons. Once they build prisons, they fill them. This is a matter of great concern to everyone, inside and outside prisons, who cares about the hunger, medical neglect and violence people in prison face. How can we avoid having our opposition to brutal injustice turned into a way of expanding the state's capacity to lock up our loved ones?

We are facing similar dynamics in the immigration reform movement. Since 2001, immigrant detention has quadrupled in the US, and the expansion of immigration enforcement is pitched to worsen rapidly under Trump. The problem is that critiques of the immigration system's injustices often lead to its expansion. Reformers often lift up images of "good immigrants," meaning people who match other cultural norms of value in the US, like people who don't have crimi-

nal records, who are not on public benefits, who get good grades, who are part of married families. The hope is that showing that immigrants can be good will lead to more humane immigration enforcement. However, this strategy has led to reforms that create a small window for limited immigration relief for a few, but justify the ongoing existence and expansion of the system, and its targeting of highly vulnerable immigrants. Those who are criminalized, who do not finish school, or who do not have steady employment are often likely to be people with darker skin who get profiled by the police, poorer people, people with disabilities, and queer and trans people. When we seek reforms of a harmful system by dividing the affected population into “good” and “bad,” we often end up strengthening the system that is our enemy.

Because of these problems with prison and immigration reform, we need to approach these systems with the goal of completely abolishing immigration enforcement and imprisonment in the United States. Attempts to make these systems and institutions better or more fair has ended up expanding them and intensifying the way they target the most vulnerable, stigmatized people. The prison system and the immigration system tell us they keep us safe, but in reality they target violence at the same communities who have always been cast as “dangers” in the colonial history of the United States: black and brown people, immi-

grants, Muslims, queer and trans people, indigenous people and people with disabilities.

Recent years have seen an explosion of resistance inspired by a vision of a world without borders and without prisons. #Not1More activists have blocked deportation buses, saying we will not accept a single deportation, we don't care about who the government says is "good" or "bad." Across the US, people in immigration prisons and criminal punishment system prisons have gone on labor and hunger strikes, exposing the outrageous conditions inside these prisons, and building solidarity together to assert their survival. People on both sides of the walls are developing the daily work of abolition: supporting people currently endangered by policing and prisons, working to stop police, prison, and border expansion, and building alternative systems for keeping each other safe.

When people first hear about the idea of abolishing prisons and borders, a common response is fear. "What about the dangerous people?" Our movements offer three key responses:

First, the people the government is putting in prisons and deporting are not more dangerous than the people outside. Law enforcement targets people because of their skin color, because they live in poor neighborhoods, because of stereotypes about vulnerable

communities that cops use to decide who looks “suspicious.” There is no reason to believe that the people inside prisons or facing deportation are more dangerous than the people outside.

Second, the people who are most likely to be dangerous to us are actually people we know. On TV we see representations of violent crime between strangers again and again, but in reality we are most likely to be hurt by people in our families and workplaces, and most of the harm that happens between people who know and love each other does not end up in the court system. If we want to address that kind of harm, we need to build community-based programs that support survivors and work on getting to the root causes of that harm, like distorted attitudes about race, gender and sexuality, stress from poverty and overwork, and unhealed wounds from prior abuse. Locking people up does not do this deep healing work; it actually brings more trauma and more violence to our communities.

Third, if we really wanted to ask how to get rid of harm and violence, we’d go after those causing the very most harm to our communities. Who is that? The police who target, harass, beat and kill our people, the politicians who defund services, give tax breaks to rich corporations and hire more cops, the corporations that pollute our lands and waters, exploit workers, and

profit off prison building and war-making. These are the forces of danger harming the most people, but we are told (by the corporate-owned media) that black and brown people, Muslims and immigrants are the dangerous ones.

The work of abolition is not easy, but it is full of hope. I am deeply inspired by the resistance of the hunger strikers at the Northwest Detention Center and by the NWDC Resistance network's consistent work of letter writing, supporting families, organizing with those in detention, rallying at the NWDC, blocking deportation buses, and convening People's Tribunals that put the system on trial. This Handbook is a beautiful offering to that work and to other people seeking to build these strategies in their own regions.

## Recommended Reading

Davis, AY (2011) *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press

Walia, H (2013) *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press  
/ Institute for Anarchist Studies

*Toward Transformative Justice*, GenerationFive, available via [www.collectiveliberation.org](http://www.collectiveliberation.org)

*Creative Interventions Toolkit*, available via [www.creative-interventions.org](http://www.creative-interventions.org)





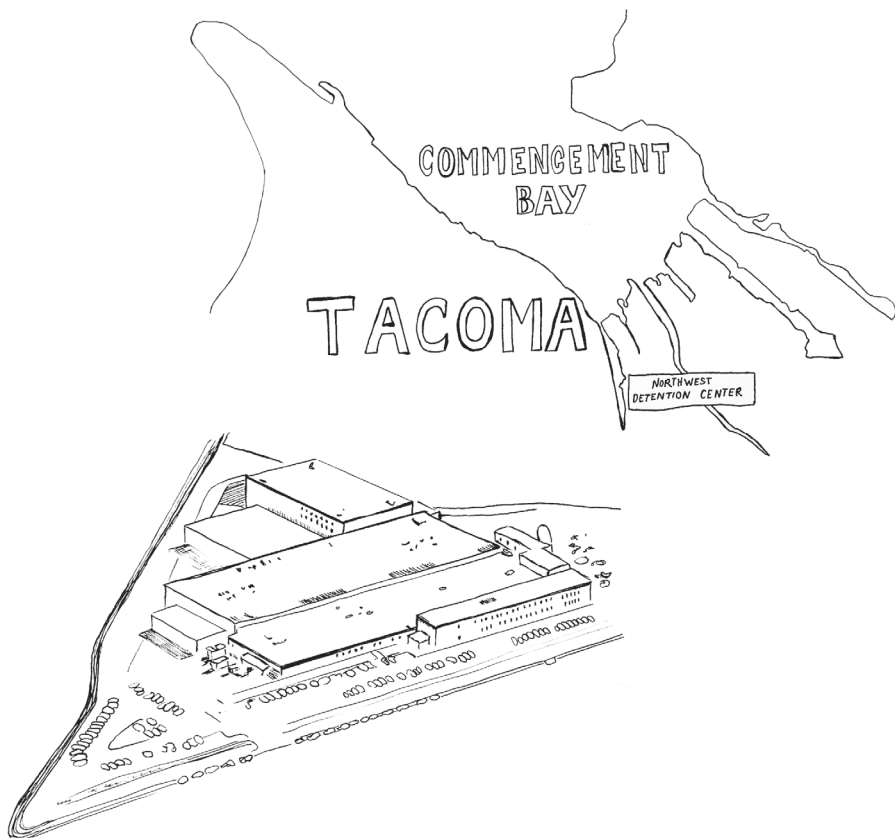
Miguel boarded a Greyhound bus in Bellingham, but the women at the ticket counter called the cops. The bus got pulled over a few miles out of town for a “random” check. Border Patrol only ordered Miguel off the bus.



Why do I need a passport to ride the Greyhound? He asked. They didn't answer — they just took him to the Northwest Detention Center.

Cipriano spent a year in jail. He couldn't afford to pay an immigration lawyer, so ICE officers were waiting to take him straight to the detention center.

While Tacoma calls itself a “welcoming city,” it allows for 1,575 people to live in detention on a toxic Superfund site with constant noise from passing freight trains.



The Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) is the 4th largest immigration prison in the US.

This is the story of immigrants at the NWDC fighting back against an unjust system by putting their bodies on the line: a hunger strike.



"I need to call  
my family, and let  
them know where  
I am. I don't get a  
phone call?"



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) can lie to you and lock you up. You don't even get the same protections that people get if they are arrested by the police. You don't get a phone call or a government lawyer, and some people don't get language interpreters. Your family might not have any way to know you've been detained.

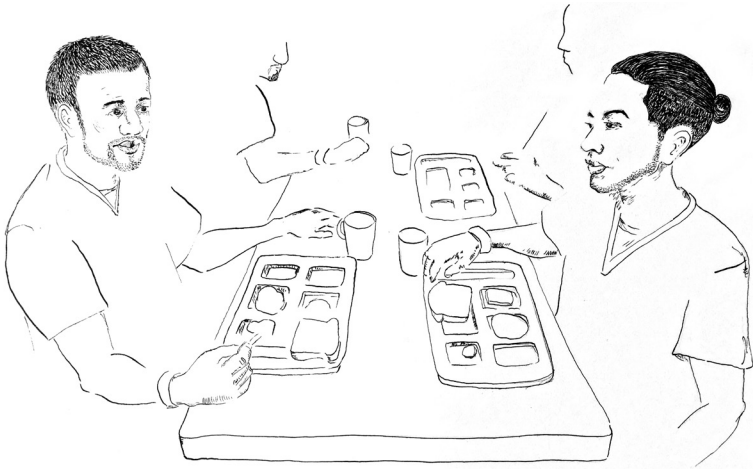
Sometimes knowing your rights is not enough. When ICE says you don't have rights, what do you do?

ICE detains people, using fear and harassment to try and make them give up before they even see a judge — they call it “voluntary repatriation.”

In the NWDC you will find everyone from green card holders who have lived in the US for 20 years to people who just arrived at the border fleeing violence and asking for asylum. Some people in the NWDC are there for only a few days. Other people are held in detention for years while they are fighting their cases.

The NWDC is run by GEO Group, a company that made more than \$138 million in 2016 for locking people up. Two-thirds of people held in immigrant detention are in prisons run by for-profit contractors. GEO says that ICE is responsible for what it does. ICE says it's not responsible for terrible conditions.

What follows is an account of the hunger strike movement which began inside NWDC on March 7, 2014.



**"I want to fight my case but I'm tired, and I can't afford a lawyer."**

Immigration and Customs Enforcement didn't want good living conditions in the detention center. Rotting food, dirty clothes, guards who change the channel if you want to watch news about what's going on outside? ICE used poor conditions and limited access to information to isolate people and chip away at their resolve to fight their cases.

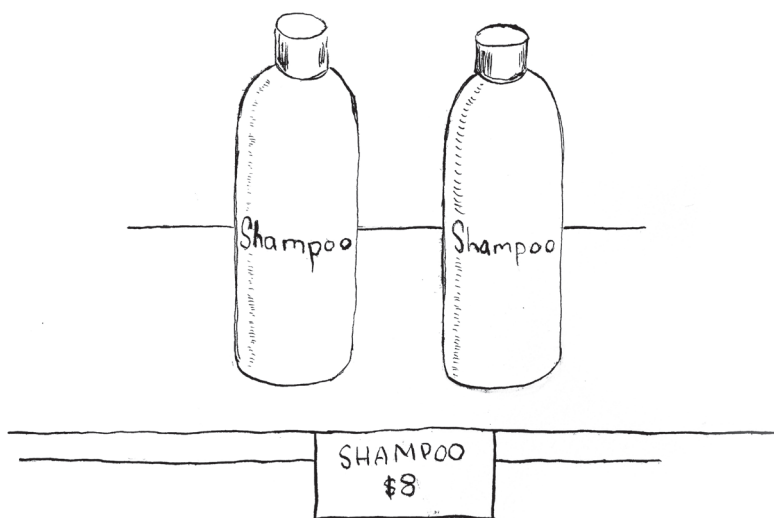
GEO Group “volunteered” people to work for a dollar a day. Immigrants did all the work to run the detention center — cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc. GEO set it up so that some people only worked 40 minutes, and others worked all night. GEO put pods (housing groups) in competition to make them clean their cells — only the “cleanest” pod would get two pieces of chicken once a week. The company wanted them to compete against each other, not come together in solidarity.

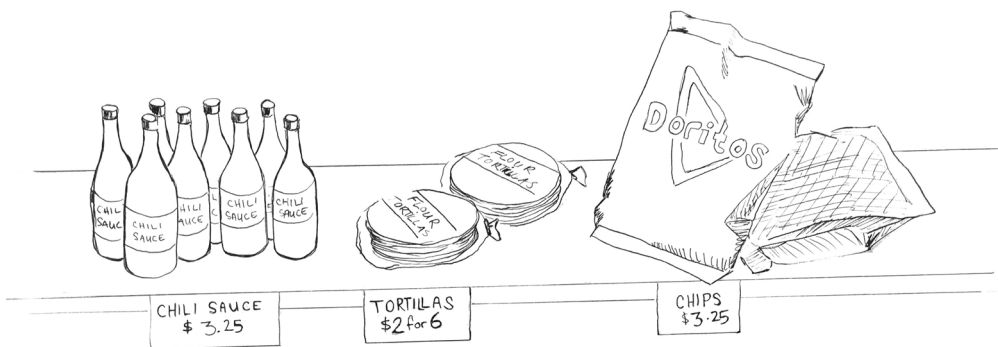




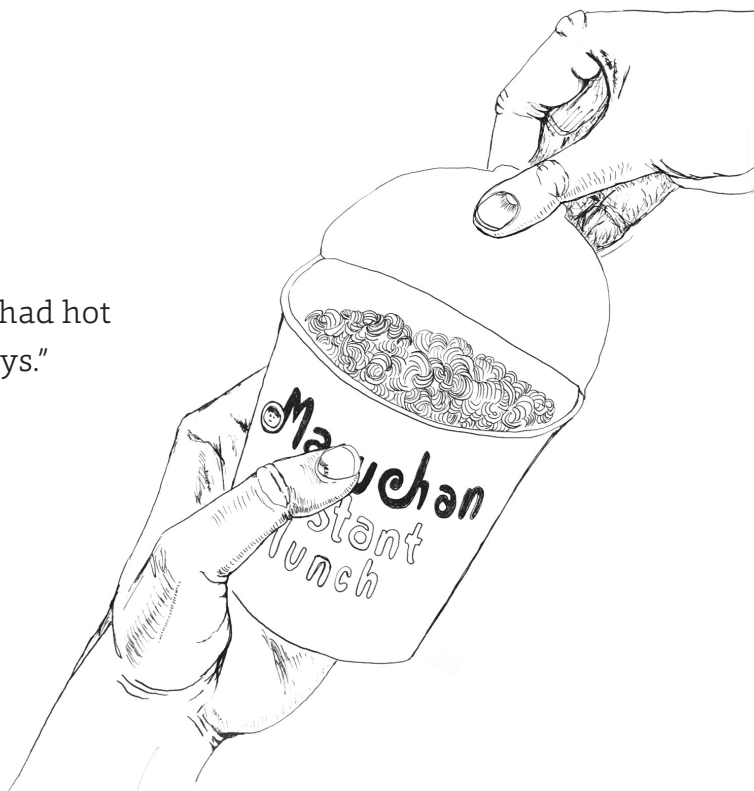
The food was so terrible, people had to buy from the commissary to survive. Their families couldn't bring in food to their loved ones, and commissary prices were much higher than what people paid on the outside, including phone calls. They charged \$2 for just six tortillas — that's two days' work! The worst part? The tortillas were flour, not corn.

It's not just food. Even shampoo was \$8.



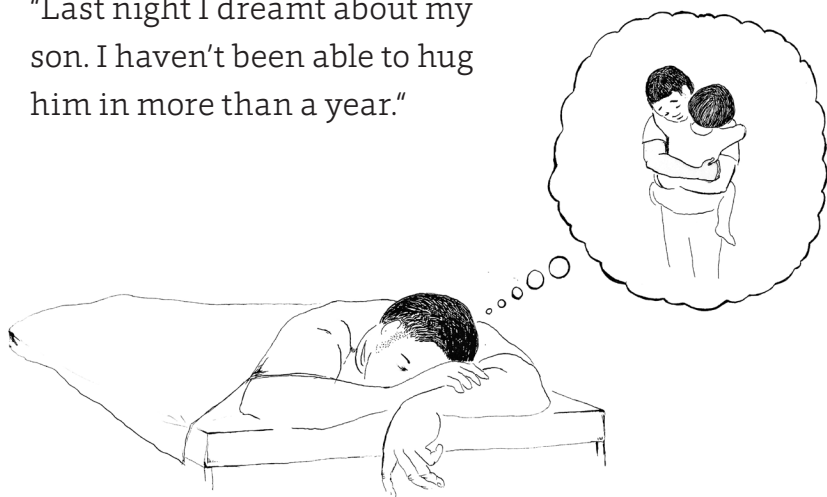


"I haven't had hot  
food in days."

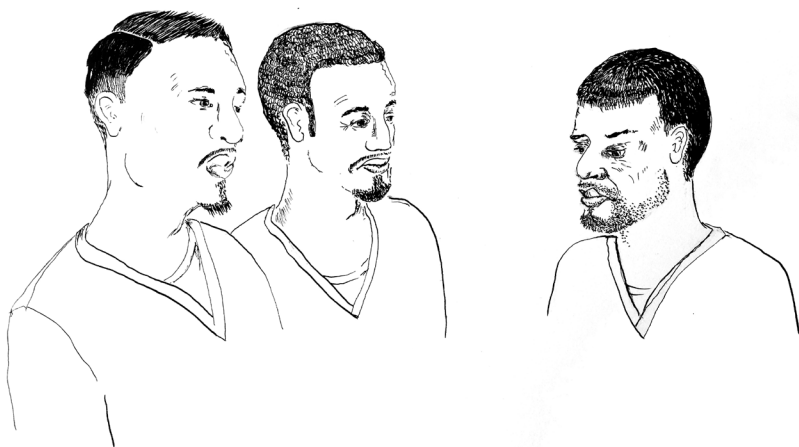


You're not supposed to make friends in here, but you do. You share the cafeteria, cells, bathrooms, the yard — everything — and you can fight for every last scrap, or you can hold each other up. People started talking to each other and sharing their experiences.

"Last night I dreamt about my son. I haven't been able to hug him in more than a year."



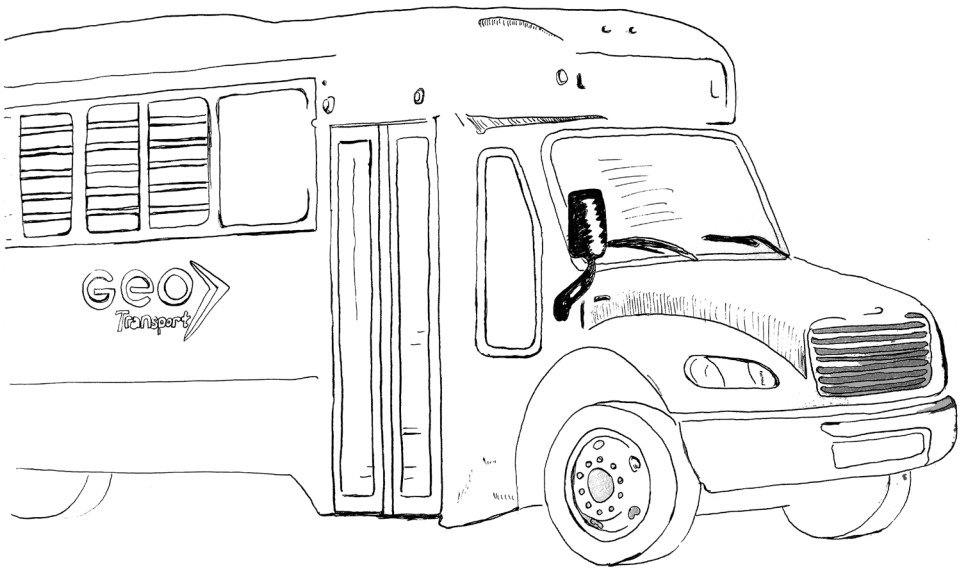
"I miss my family, my wife, my children. If I could get bond at least I could be working to support them and afford to hire a lawyer to fight my case."



"They're making money off us like we're not even human. But we're human beings, and we deserve respect."

"We need to organize."

At times, GEO Group sent 125 people weekly on a bus to the airport for deportation.



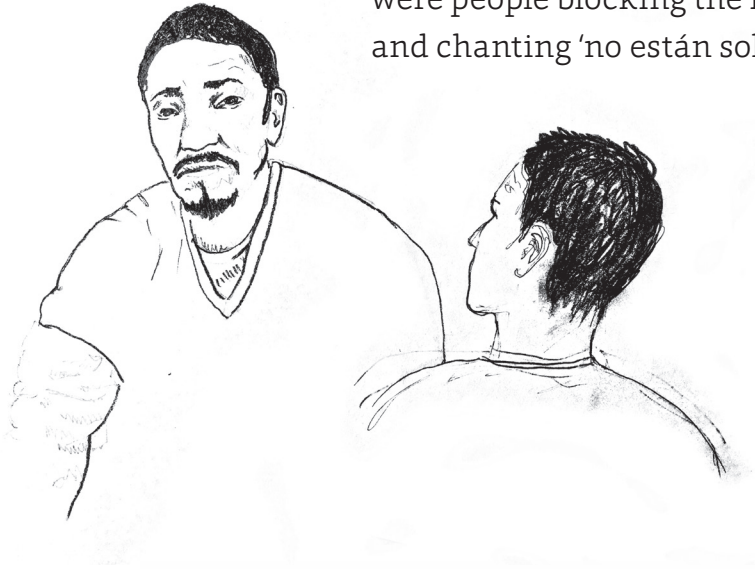
Activists called for a stop to deportations, but Obama didn't respond.

Activists started blocking deportation buses to bring the deportation machine to a halt. They demanded #Not1More deportation.

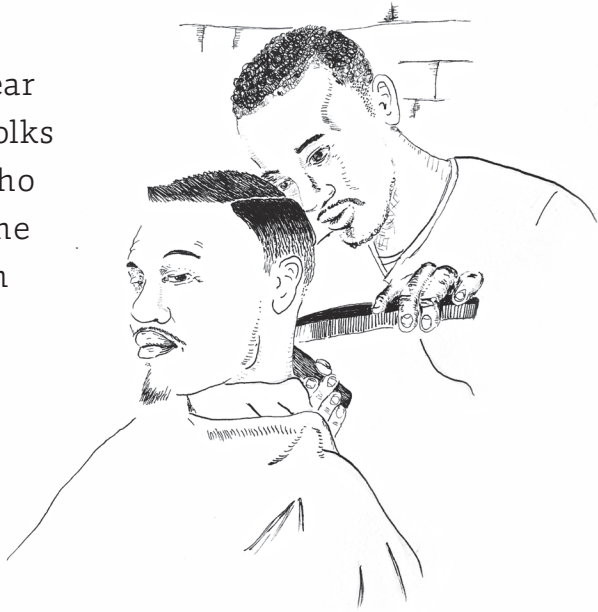


#Not1More means not one more. Every human life has value, and every deportation they stopped was a win.

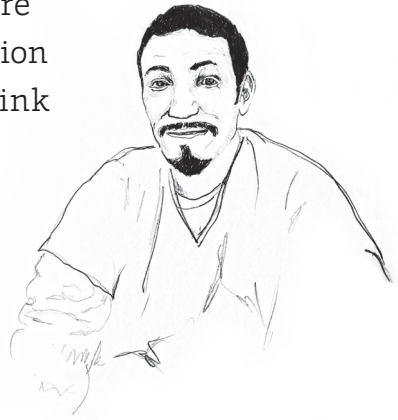
"The bus couldn't leave, there were people blocking the road and chanting 'no están solos.'"



"Did you hear about the folks outside who stopped the deportation bus?"



"We have to do something, if there are folks out there paying attention to what's happening in here. I think we should go on hunger strike."



"I agree, they are treating us like animals. I'll hunger strike. I won't miss the cold beans or the worms."

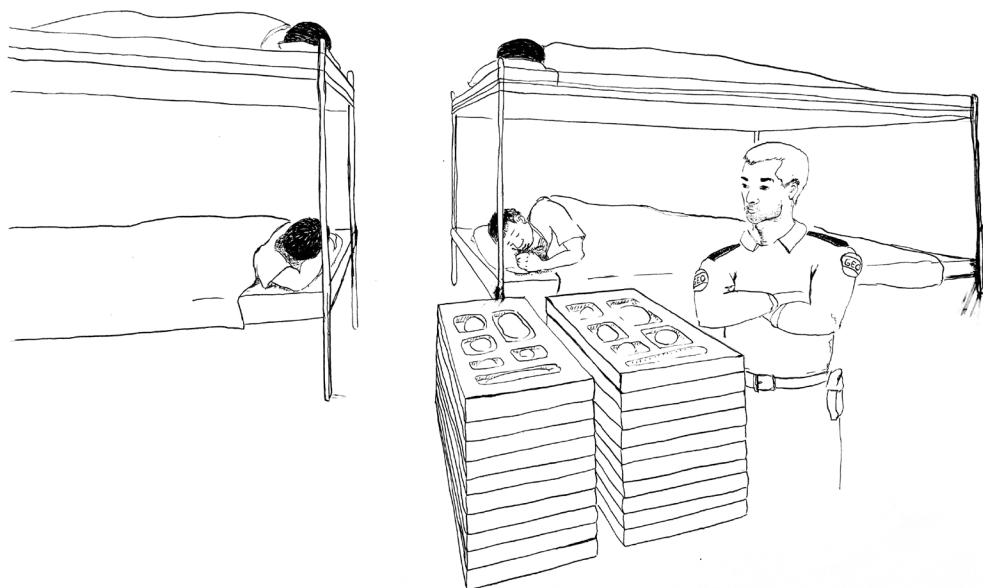
"There are folks out there paying attention. We should strike!"



The idea spread and people started to plan for the hunger strike, picking a date and telling as many people inside and out as they could. More and more said they would join.



On March 7, 2014, 1,200 people stopped eating. They stayed in their beds through breakfast. They didn't take lunch or dinner. Guards noted who was refusing food.



"No one is getting up for breakfast?"

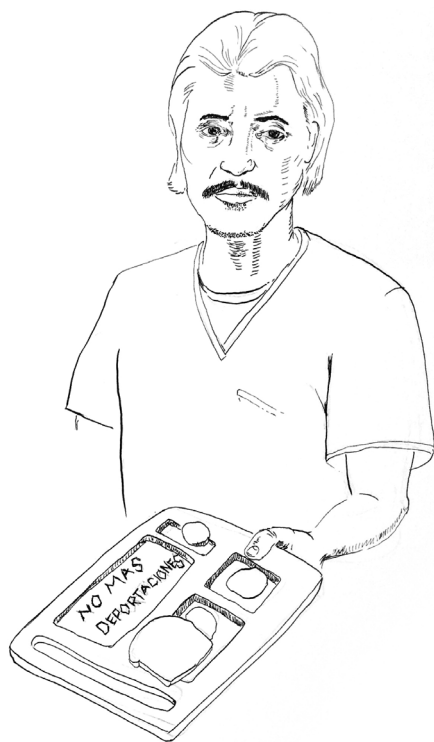
The strike wasn't easy. While a few people stayed on strike the whole time, not everybody could. The strikers started coordinating and taking turns.

Even before, Cipriano was already an organizer. He knew that sometimes you have to claim rights that the state says you don't have. Other strikers looked to him as one of the leaders. The Detention Center guards wrote him up for organizing and placed him in solitary confinement "pending investigation." ICE says that it does not punish detainees with solitary confinement, but it happened to Cipriano.

The guards laughed at him. They told him everyone else had given up and that the strike was over.

He stayed on hunger strike anyway.

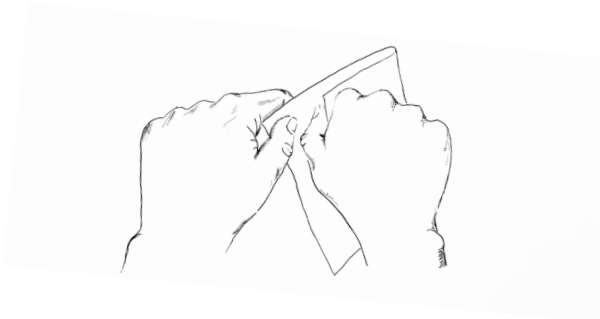
The guards learned that Cipriano had been writing political messages under the pen name "corazón con plumas." They took away his pens and pencils, and they threw him in the "hole" for 10 days. He didn't give up — he used a fork to write instead.



Outside supporters worked to share the news about the hunger strike around the world. Reporters came from Mexico, England and even Japan.



People wrote letters to folks in detention at rallies outside the NWDC.

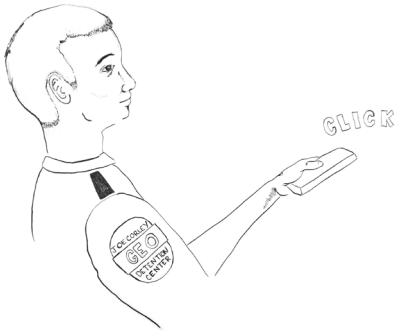


## **NEWS COVERAGE: IMMIGRANTS FACE RETALIATION DURING HUNGER STRIKE**

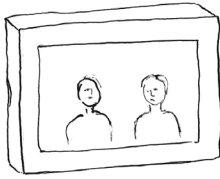
The strike began as a protest against ongoing deportations and substandard conditions at the detention center, including quality of food and treatment, lower commissary prices, and better pay for work done at the facility. Detainees are fed potatoes and milk. According to Villalpando, snacks available in the commissary can cost the equivalent of five days' pay.

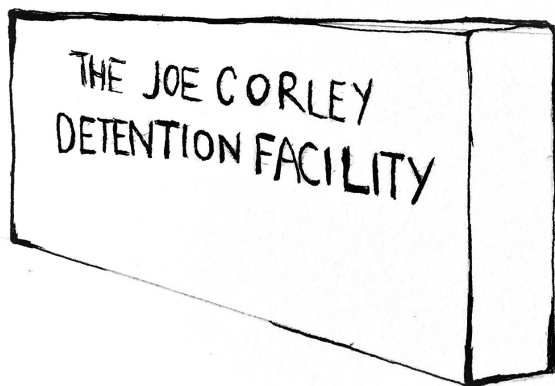
On March 10, 2014, the detainees expanded their demands to include release on bond for detainees, saying in a letter, "Without a bond we spend months, even one-to-two years locked up without knowing what's going to happen to us and our families and without being able to economically support our families, causing them to fall deeper into poverty."





Less than a week after the the Tacoma strike started, a group of folks held in Joe Corley Detention Center in Texas saw the hunger strike on the news. Like the NWDC, GEO Group also ran Corley Detention Center in poor conditions. Organizers inside felt that they had little to lose with pending deportation orders, and wanted the world to know that the struggle in Tacoma was shared throughout the US.





Supporters on the outside shared the news with hunger strikers in Tacoma. This message was relayed to hunger strikers in Corley through the press:

"My name is Ramón and I am one of the ones on strike in the detention center in Tacoma. The only thing I want to say is don't be afraid, we must keep going, so that we are heard and so that we can be free."

*"Do you have any advice for those in Texas?"*

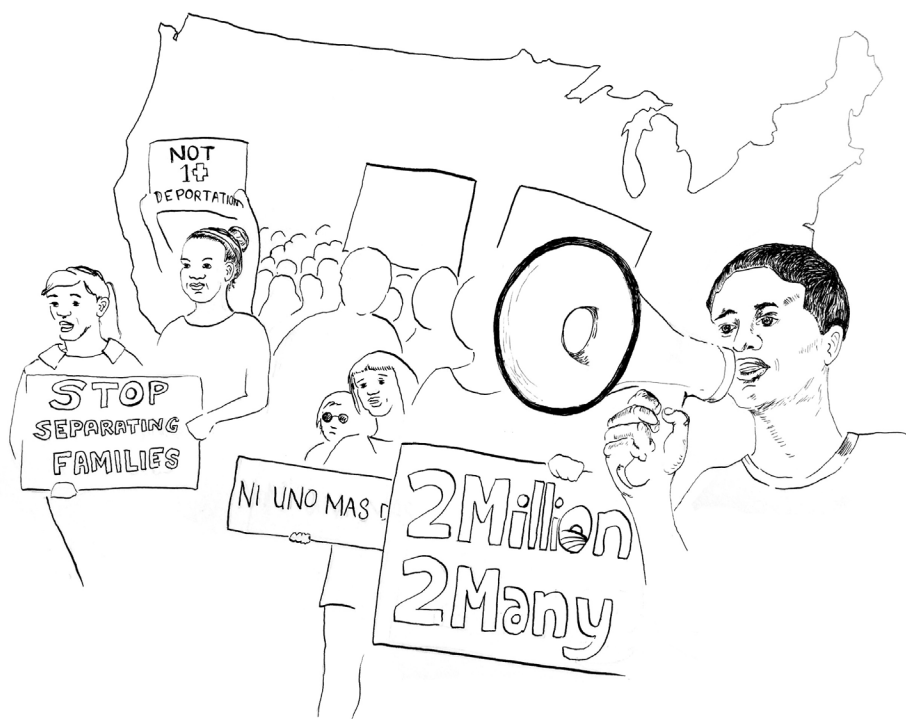
"Well, just to not be afraid, they can't do anything to us. We are locked up, they can't lock us up more. They can't do anything against us because we're not doing anything wrong, we're demanding our rights. You should keep going forward, and not yield. I know it's hard but we must keep going."

At rallies, organizers outside would read letters out loud and have live phone calls with organizers inside the NWDC that they blasted on the speakers. One of the letters is below:

“We have a profound respect for food, we honor it, we know that it is necessary and vital for many here and in the rest of the world, but to make it known that we are here, that we exist, it seems like the only alternative to say, ‘we are here’ [‘presentes’]. We take this opportunity to be the spokespeople of the infinite number of compañeros and compañeras detained who, at the same time in their distinct pods have joined the Act of April 5th to say that we are one in this struggle for the just cause of the immigrants, that we will continue adding our voices, together with yours, so that our echo will have greater resonance, as it includes every time more women and men convinced that it is inhumane to destroy families, that in these acts we are treated unjustly.

There are many years of patient waiting, an uncertain future for our children and honest and hardworking people, they lead us to the growing cry every time louder: Not one more! Ya basta!”

On April 5, 2014, as the number of people deported by the Obama administration reached 2 million, over a hundred actions in over 80 cities across the US called for an end to all deportations.





As one hunger striker explained to the media:

“We received threats from the guards saying after 72 hours we will have our commissary privileges taken away, that we would be seeing medical and get tubes down our throats and be force fed. I’m not an animal. It’s a cruel way to grab somebody, hold them down and put a tube down their throat. We are here to fight our cases and get back to our families. We aren’t here to be tortured.”



Outside organizers risked their freedom for those inside.

*“And you came out as undocumented, and risked everything?”*

“Yes. We are not going to live in fear any longer.”



“I believe if you really want to make people aware of the situation we need a work stoppage. This facility is run by detainees, and if everybody stopped working then we could negotiate the pay raise, we could talk about the quality of the food, the living conditions. I believe we should be eligible for parole so we can be with our families, and working so we can afford our attorneys. I’ve been in here 21 months now, fighting my case by myself, no attorney. I’m just doing this for my kids.”

GEO guards retaliated and placed this organizer in a segregation unit claiming “illegal use of a copy machine,” when he was printing out a letter to organize a work stoppage, of the “volunteer” work program.



GEO placed many hunger strikers in solitary confinement for organizing, shortened family visiting time, and transferred some folks to other facilities, which made it difficult if not impossible to have family visits. The hunger strikers were determined and kept on resisting, and encouraging others to do the same.



Sandy Restrepo, an immigration lawyer who met with some of the hunger strikers, described guards as armed and dressed in riot gear. She explained, “immigrants on hunger strike are being placed in solitary confinement, coerced into signing deportation forms, and threatened with forced-feeding if they continue their protest. Asylum seekers are being threatened with denial of their cases.”

You say that this cube isn't a prison  
You say that this cube isn't a cell  
You say that this cell isn't part of a jail,  
What else are you here to tell me?





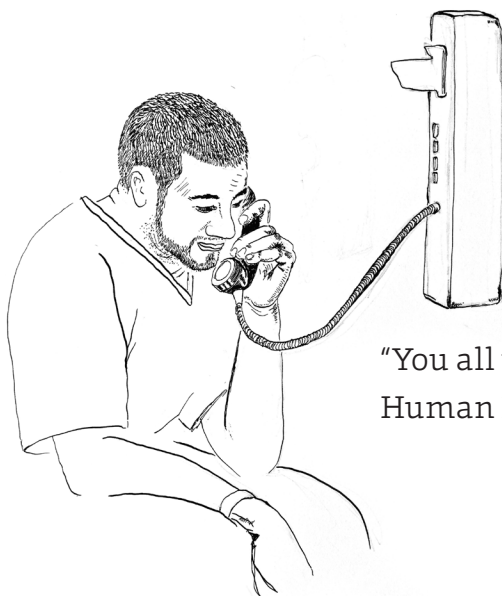
Every instance of retaliation revealed the unfairness of state violence and grew the resistance.

Elected officials visited the NWDC, and they were appalled.

The ACLU sued.

Legislators visited the NWDC for the first time, considering activists' call to shut it down. Congressman Adam Smith even championed the Accountability in Immigrant Detention Act of 2015. While the bill has not yet passed, this opened up the political possibility of shutting down the detention center.

The rallies grew, and immigrants outside joined those on the inside. In a Blue Ribbon Commission, they stated, "As active members of the undocumented community organizing in the US, we are asking you to include us in meetings about immigration and administrative relief. Simply stated, we are asking for there to be no more meetings about us without us."



"You all won the Seattle  
Human Rights Award."

After 56 days on hunger strike, those still in detention called an end on May 1st. Most people who put their bodies on the line gained nothing for themselves. In addition to transfer further away from loved ones, and solitary confinement, many were deported.

When outside activists shined a light on the struggle, GEO had to back down. Nobody was force fed, and concerns about retaliation led to greater discretion with transfers and use of solitary confinement and segregation. Seattle's Human Rights Award brought recognition to the racist deportation system, the deplorable conditions in the detention center and the struggle of the hunger strikers. Commissary prices dropped. Many strikers were released and reunited with their families.

Many others were deported. Although he struggled to stay in the USA for over a year, in the end Cipriano was deported. He continues to support the NWDC Resistance as a mentor. His family still lives in the Pacific Northwest. Although he lost his case, he reclaimed his dignity in the deportation process. In so doing, he revealed how our immigration system criminalizes people.

Three years later, the struggle continues. Until people put their bodies on the line, GEO was able to make the prisons invisible — even to those who live nearby. More people now know about the NWDC, and have questions about how it got built on a toxic site, why it is run by a for-profit company, and why the state continues to fill up as many beds as possible.





The hunger strikers helped folks detained in the Northwest Detention Center reject immigration strategies that divide people into legal/illegal, worthy/unworthy where some people deserve a path to citizenship and other people deserve to be deported. Today, more know that justice means no more cages. This means a movement to end detention and deportation.

On the outside, more folks have begun to question our unjust immigration system. Instead of trying to bring ourselves up by putting others down, we have experienced the power of coming together and supporting each other. Our movement to call for an end to the detention and deportation machine is growing.

Join us.

A letter from hunger strikers to those of you in solidarity:

To those of you who, with a noble attitude faced with rain, wintry wind, sun, moon and stars, you bring to us much more than 120 minutes of vital energy to our stubborn hopes.

To you who know that we exist, that the results of the work we do arrives to the warmth of your homes, to be enjoyed at your dinner table.

To those of you who are not aware of our work that complements and serves your daily life.

To those of you who think that we are useful only as a label on the forehead with a sign of dollars and cents that you justify with an immoral financial budget at the cost of those who contribute to it.

To you, as well, who profit from pain and destruction of families.

To our pod companions: A, B, C, D, F, G...

Involuntary residents, even more, unfairly labeled as criminals of the Northwest Detention Center – Tacoma (NWDC-T) in a difficult communication environment, we reiterate our willingness to join the struggle of our

brothers and sisters in distinct fronts to achieve an inclusive and humanitarian solution for millions of immigrant collaborators with “blood, sweat and tears” to the greatness of this country, today multinational, to come out of the shadows and access their full rights as workers, citizens and humans in this country, on the side of democracy, of non-discrimination and equality of its inhabitants.

We trust that these efforts, the solidarity and the struggle that emanates from every corner of this fruitful territory. Our disposition, our willingness, our voice clamors: Not one more!

Two million families destroyed do not deserve a bleak and uncertain future, it is not justified with laws and twisted arguments that leave orphans and hearts torn apart, it is a disgrace that an advanced democratic society, at the vanguard of anti-discrimination, and vigilant in respecting and following human rights it does not put an end to a lacerated wound that threatens all of society with gangrene, decidedly, by waves of immigrants.

With satisfaction, we recently learned that parts of the international community greet us in solidarity with this movement that fights for the full rights of immigrants. Their encouraging messages motivate and boost the call for full immigrant rights. Their messages of en-

couragement encourage us to remain standing and not to let our guard down. We are also encouraged by those immigrant “guests” detained in Texas and California, to them we send fraternal greetings and note that their struggle is ours, it is the same, and that together, with the support of residents, citizens, and all the community we will win.

Yes we can!

Stop the unjust and immoral deportations!  
Stop ripping families apart!  
Stop isolating those detained!

Yes to the defense of dignity and liberty!  
Yes to a humane and inclusive immigration reform!

March 19, 2014  
NWDC-Tacoma  
Colectivo de Detenidos

## Reflections Three Years Later

Union, solidarity, conscience, organization, and courage are poison for division.

The lands of the so-called American Continent sheltered other cultures that came from afar, which were welcomed by the natives of these places. Some arrived with ambition of wealth, many fled hunger or persecution. In this generous land, we began to create borders that we used both to loot other nations and to exclude others. In this generous land, those in power today continue to exclude us and sow divisions.

The detainees in the NWDC overcame their divisions, we overcame being of different nations and cultures. We understood that to coexist we had to get to the next step, to overcome the barriers of ICE/GEO. We know that our struggle is just, we did not give in to the fear that they wanted to spread and make us succumb to. We managed to connect with wonderful women who gave vitality to the movement when men thought they could not continue the fight – we honor them.

There was happiness and hope in the movement, a feeling that continues today, in the great solidarity of our brothers/sisters who supported us outside those walls. There is unity and solidarity in a single goal:

NOT ONE MORE.

¡ Si se puede!

Colectivo del NWDC (Los de adentro y los deportados)  
March 2017

What's next? Make personal connections to support our movement:

1. Join a pen pal program that connects folks in detention with those on the outside. This helps us remind individuals that they are not alone, and also helps us to better understand the individual consequences of national policies. NWDC Resistance has a pen pal program, and we also like Black & Pink's national model.
2. Court support for anyone brave enough to fight their case, no matter their history. Showing up reminds judges that we see our immigration system, and we will hold the state accountable.

The best way to do this work is connect with organizers who have already been doing this work! We recommend finding folks through #Not1More network, MiJente, or Detention Watch Network. Donate your time, money and public support to advance the immigrant justice movement!!

Join our movement!  
Look for us through the #Not1More network,  
MiJente, or Detention Watch Network.



[www.nwdcresistance.org](http://www.nwdcresistance.org)