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CONVICTS FIND PROTEST OF TOUGHEST PRISON IS A TOUGH SELL; [Chicagoland Final Edition]

Christi Parsons, Tribune Staff Writer Freelance writer Laurie Grano ontributed to this report. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: May 14, 2000. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

This isn't the first time inmates have complained about the conditions at Tamms, the state's only super-maximum security prison. The prison is home to several gang leaders and members, as well as inmates who repeatedly attack other prisoners and guards. At any given time, several Tamms inmates usually are refusing prison meals to protest prison policy, prison officials say.

Full Text (854 words)

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When Illinois opened a special super-maximum security prison for its most dangerous and recalcitrant inmates two years ago in Downstate Tamms, the idea was to make things so unpleasant that no one would ever want to go there.

But the "worst of the worst" prisoners now locked up in the institution say things are just too bad, even for them, and are staging a hunger strike in protest.

The food is terrible, they say. They don't get enough exercise. And adding insult to injury: The shoes are uncomfortable.

"They are protesting horrendous conditions," said Jean Snyder, a Chicago attorney who has filed lawsuits on the prisoners' behalf. "Some of it may sound trivial to us, but it is a big problem for them."

As many as 168 of the prison's 270 inmates have participated in the hunger strike since it started May 1, although late last week only 15 of the prisoners taking part in the strike refused to eat breakfast.

So far the tactic has failed to win much sympathy for the inmates, whose hunger strike has not evoked comparisons to Mohandas Gandhi's. They earned their way into the spartan prison, said Gov. George Ryan.

"Tamms is meant to be a tough place," Ryan said. "They are very bad people. . . . I'd imagine they're not very happy about being there."

In fact, one corrections official said the strike is a sign that things are working as they should at Tamms.

This isn't the first time inmates have complained about the conditions at Tamms, the state's only super-maximum security prison. The prison is home to several gang leaders and members, as well as inmates who repeatedly attack other prisoners and guards. At any given time, several Tamms inmates usually are refusing prison meals to protest prison policy, prison officials say.

This strike has garnered more attention, though. Media coverage-- relayed to inmates via radio, television and conversations with their lawyers--has inspired more participation than the usual hunger strikes, prison officials say. Donnie Snyder, director of the Illinois Department of Corrections, said he is taking the strike seriously but doesn't plan to grant the inmates' requests on their terms.

"It's always a concern when someone jeopardizes their health," Snyder said. "But as an agency, we're not going to be blackmailed into anything."

If the prisoners want special privileges, Snyder said, "all they have to do is behave and work their way back out of Tamms. They can have a lot of those things at other facilities, but not at Tamms."

Prison medical staffers will monitor the striking inmates and feed them intravenously if necessary, Snyder said.

The inmates' complaints run the gamut. Prisoners object to a policy that allows them daily exercise in a cement cage with only a handball for equipment.

They dislike "meal loaf," a baked concoction of meat and vegetables served to those who do such things as throw food, urine and feces at guards.

They object to the use of tear gas and the near-total isolation at the institution.

And they complain they're not allowed to wear arch supports.

"I'm sorry, that's kind of a stretch," said prison spokesman Nic Howell.

But the inmates' advocates say the list of demands is no laughing matter.

"It's not a question of just not liking the food," said Alan Mills, legal director of the Uptown People's Law Center, a not-for-profit legal clinic. "It's not edible. ... This is about very basic human conditions. If we treated animals in a zoo like this, the zoo would be shut down as cruel and inhumane."

Such treatment does nothing to rehabilitate inmates, Mills said, and may even make them more dangerous.

"So many begin to exhibit psychotic tendencies after being locked up in a room the size of a bathroom," he said. "Almost all of them are going to get out onto the street someday. What will they be like then?"

Some state lawmakers say they plan to look into the complaints. State Rep. Tom Johnson (R-West Chicago), a former prosecutor who is co-chairman of the House Prison Management Reform Committee, said the strike has attracted attention. But it will bring about change only if the complaints are substantiated, he said.

"If there is credibility to certain allegations, the next thing you'll see are lawsuits," Johnson said. "That brings changes, also. The lawsuit is the 24-hour, 365-day-a-year hunger strike."

But just as many legislators are outraged by the complaints.

"I don't have a lot of sympathy for these guys," said Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale), who was then-Gov. Jim Edgar's chief of staff when the state began planning the Tamms facility. "They don't get out enough? That's part of the point, that they don't get outside. This facility was not to be a penitentiary full of conveniences."

Prison officials also remained unmoved as the hunger strike neared the end of its second week.

"Basically, this whole business just kind of proves that Tamms works," Howell said.

For his part, Ryan said he doesn't see a need for an overhaul.

"We're not going to change the conditions at the prison," Ryan said. "The prison was built to be that way."

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