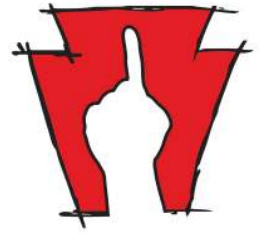


THE KEYSTONE

Fayette Health Justice Issue

A NEWSLETTER BY THE MEMBERS OF PUT PEOPLE FIRST! PENNSYLVANIA



How Goliath Goes Down

by Gabriel

For Fayette Health Justice, 2018 was a year of action, growth, and hope in the face of adversity. We remain more steadfast and committed to our work than ever.

Our last newsletter (available upon request) gave some background on how decades of coal waste dumped into what became prison grounds contributed to the dangerous conditions faced by all inhabitants of SCI Fayette and the surrounding area of LaBelle, PA.

In 2019, we have more investigative work on the way. As we team up with an expanding network of advocacy organizations, we offer ourselves up to give a platform for you and your loved ones to share your experiences of health and environment at Fayette.

For now, we want to give our readers a sense of some of the work we have done since the last newsletter, a glimpse of what is to come, and an invitation to join us in this struggle.

Make no mistake that Goliath is strong. It may seem that he is even getting stronger. But having heard from many of you over the last year we are more confident than ever that the Davids of the world are stronger. It is sometimes easy to lose sight of our collective strength when we are confronted every day with a Goliath that seeks to separate us from our kin and friends, to keep us in the dark about how we are oppressed, and on top of it all to poison us for profit.

A Year in Review

On June 4, 2018, hundreds of us from across Pennsylvania gathered at the state capital in Harrisburg as part of the Poor People's Campaign summer of action. As the Fayette Justice Healthcare Rights Committee(HRC) of Put People First! PA, we brought attention to the struggles at SCI Fayette through media and through action. In a packed rally inside of the capitol rotunda, speakers shared their stories about their poisoned land and poor healthcare. People also shared their stories of how they are fighting back!

Richard, a member of the Fayette Justice HRC, shared the story of his time at SCI Fayette, and his struggles with toxic air and toxic water on the inside. After the injustice he survived as a prisoner, Richard decided to dedicate his efforts to helping others still incarcerated in this toxic wasteland get out. That same day, Richard was also interviewed by KALW public radio of San Francisco about his time at SCI Fayette and the connections between prison, environmental, and health justice.

After the rally inside of the capitol rotunda, hundreds of us then marched outside, where we took nonviolent direct action and blocked access to the building. Through our civil disobedience, we forced the capital police to arrest dozens of us. We were the largest act of civil disobedience in the summer of action nationally, with nearly 100 arrests.



We bore witness to this immoral system which harms us, poisons us, silences us. We brought attention to the enduring suffering and mass number of wrongful deaths at the hands of profiteers and co-conspirators who care more about making a buck than making us well.

We called out those profiteers, like Independence Blue Cross and other health insurance companies which make money by denying us care, Manor Care and other senior care companies which warehouse our elders and delay needed care, and Correct Care Solutions, who profit off of our sickness in every state prison in PA. We also mourned the loved ones we have lost over the year to the profiteers' exploitation.

Later that summer Fayette Health Justice attended the Fight Toxic Prison Convergence in Pittsburgh, where we met with a national network of organizers and lawyers working on the inside and outside of prisons to fight mass incarceration and environmental injustice.

There we shared stories of the toxic air and toxic water at SCI Fayette and connected with other current and former inmates and families from all over Pennsylvania. As part of the Fight Toxic Convergence, we marched through the streets of downtown Pittsburgh to publicize prison, environmental, and healthcare profiteers. We first stopped at the headquarters of EQT, one of the largest fracking companies in the United States, to call out their poisoning of drinking water in Pennsylvania and across the country. Then, we marched to a facility run by the energy company NRG. NRG is one of two companies whose millions of pounds of coal ash has been dumped at the grounds surrounding SCI Fayette.

Carmen (name changed by request), shared the story of her husband, a lifer inside SCI Fayette who is fighting to get clean water.

Finally, we have continued to research and learn about the prison, environmental, and healthcare powers who are blocking efforts to win justice at SCI Fayette. We believe that knowledge is power, and so we are committed to education and research. We are working on a special newsletter with the findings of our research, and we have already compiled dozens of articles on the DOC and prison profiteers. Stay tuned for more in the coming months!

The Environmental Costs of Prisons:

Transcript from Interview conducted with KALW on June 4th, 2018

The cruel and inhumane conditions that many prison inmates live in have been well documented. On this edition of Your Call, we'll discuss environmental factors that can make prison even more difficult, and in some cases, deadly.

Interviewer: Rose Aguilar

Guests:

Panagioti Tsolkas, co-founder of the Prison Ecology Project

Professor David Pellow, director of the Global Environmental Justice Project at UC Santa Barbara

Richard Mosley, organizer and member of the Fayette Justice Healthcare Rights Committee of Put People First! PA and former inmate at SCI Fayette

Rose: Today we are wrapping up our week long series on prisons. We discussed cruel and inhumane conditions, the lack of proper health care, and the isolation of solitary confinement...At the Massachusetts Correctional Facility in Norfolk, inmates drink brown water which was found to have dangerous levels of manganese and the dogs on staff were given bottled water while inmates were not. Almost 2/3 suffered from rashes and skin problems. The Northwest Detention Center in Washington state is next to the Tacoma Tar Patch which is a superfund clean up site. Detainees there have complained of headaches, especially at night. Victorville Correctional Complex here in California is also built on a superfund site, a former weapons storage area. When the Federal Bureau of Prisons completes environmental impact statements about proposed sites for prison construction, they usually do not consider the impact on inmates. And gradually links are being made between the traditional environmental movement and advocates for prisoners. These groups are working together to strategize on blocking and shutting down prisons in toxic locations. And the alliance is working on developing new legal strategies. Today we are talking about the links between prisons and the environment.

And today we are joined by Panagioti Tsolkas, co-founder of the Prison Ecology Project, an organization that maps the intersection of mass incarceration and environmental degradation. Panagioti is also an organizer with the Fight Toxic Prisons movement and he joins us from Gainesville, FL...We're also joined by [Professor] David Pellow, director of the Global Environmental Justice Project at UC Santa Barbara. Professor Pellow's recent book, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, has a chapter focusing on the history and present of the intersections of the environmental and prison activists' movements...And Richard Mosley is with the Fayette Health Justice Campaign. Richard spent four years incarcerated at SCI Fayette, the state correctional institute in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, which was built next to a coal ash dump. During those four years, Richard developed respiratory infections and other health problems. Some of his fellow inmates actually died of cancer. The experience led Richard to become active in a movement to try and shut down the prison after he was released. And we reached out to the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice but they did not respond to our request.

Rose: Richard, I'd like to start off with you...Can you talk about when you first started having health problems and what they were exactly?

Richard: ...Well what initially happened when I showed up in 2008, immediately I was having trouble breathing. It was mild at first. But now that I think about it, my body was going into defensive mode. And my nose closed up I'd say after a week there. And then you know, I started having problems breathing, so it started to take your attention. Well, why am I struggling to breathe? And then you start getting throat problems, digestive issues. So then my journey or nightmare began dealing with being in a toxic environment.

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Rose: And did you say anything to guards or prison administration?

Richard: Well when you're there and coming from the Eastern part of the state where I had no idea what was making me sick, so it was a mystery to me. When I was contacting my family and friends they were like, what's wrong with you? And I had no clue. It's not until actually I was released that I found out what I was suffering from.

Rose: And according to a report from the Abolitionist Law Center, eleven prisoners at SCI Fayette died from cancer between 2010 and 2013 and six others were diagnosed with cancer. What did you hear from others who were in jail at that time?

Richard: Well no one because we had restricted access to information, especially that kind of information. No one really knew. Everyone was just on allergy medicine. Everybody was running back and forth to the doctor for digestive stuff, respiratory stuff but nobody really understood the full magnitude of what we were sitting on top of. And so it's not until the guards started to get sick that they blew the whistle. That's how this thing really got exposed. As long as the inmates were getting sick it really wasn't a big deal. But then the residents in the neighborhood started getting sick and dying at high rates of cancer also.

Rose: What did you learn after you got out?

Richard: What I learned after I got out is that the place was built on forty million tons of coal waste and so it wasn't surprising that people were having those kind of situations. And it took me a couple years to kinda get myself back together cause I was athletic. I had never been sick, never was suffering from any kind of ailments, kind of sickness...And I lost forty pounds and I basically thought I was gonna die in there.

Rose: Did you get any care inside?

Richard: Well care was basically some allergy medicine and they were telling me my problems were psychosomatic. That I was fine, that there was nothing wrong with me. And I just, ya know, nothing really was wrong with me.

Rose: And what kind of care were you able to get when you got out?

Richard: Well, I had to get on some antibiotics, had to get on steroids, and just staying away from that environment, I slowly started to get myself together. But I still struggle a little bit. I'm still on all kinds of respiratory stuff...inhalers and stuff like that; so I'm not fully recovered.

Rose: Panagioti, how common are stories like the one that we're hearing from Richard?

Panagioti: Unfortunately, we see stories like this all over the country. And ya know, California, being one of the leading prisons that have decades of records of environmental violations, water quality problems, health impacts but states all over the country. In 2007, the Prison Legal News did an expose on water quality related health issues in prisons and they highlighted seventeen states that had publicly available records and documents of not just prisoners' experiences, which of course are some of the most legitimate firsthand experiences, but also government agencies, environmental agencies both stating in federal and newspaper reports exposes all over the country. In 2017, they released a Prison Legal News updated report highlighting California in particular, showing problems from sewage waste to the spread of illnesses like Legionnaire's disease, [?] fever or arsenic in the water or environmental conditions...things related to the surrounding area water and soil or related to being trapped inside... basically forcing people to live inside warehouses [where] the air quality, air circulation, water quality and sewage is all being poorly managed in these overpopulated facilities.

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Rose: Professor [David] Pellow, we are having a conversation about criminal justice reform and prison reform in this country. But this is one angle that really doesn't get much attention. And if you look hard enough, there's a lot of information out there. The Prison Ecology Project is doing incredible work. One of the chapters in your book, "What is Critical Environmental Justice," focuses on the history of the intersections of the environmental and prison activism movements. For people who don't really know much about this, what would you add? How common is Richard's story?

David: First of all, I want to say thank you to Richard and Pangioti. These two men are doing incredible work to bring these issues to the forefront, into the public conversation and discourse. And as a professor, I'm a mere observer and chronicler of this work. But this is something that has been going on arguably since long before this country was founded. I mean some of the first carceral facilities one could argue, were those that incarcerated Native Americans who were doing and engaging in resistance against colonization. And we look at what happened with African Americans who were enslaved. Many many millions were enslaved in this country in systems of forced labor and dealing with all sorts of environmental and public health threats... You can take a look at Harriet Washington's book, *Medical Apartheid*, to look at some of those conditions and the ways in which slaves' bodies were used as sites of experimentation that would advance medicine and science for this country. We're seeing this continuing today in the state of Pennsylvania. For example, we're still seeing people who are reeling from decades of medical experimentation and torture, what I call chemical warfare. Where doctors and scientists are actually exposing prisoners' bodies at Holmesburg Prison to things like Dioxin, the most toxic substance known to science. And doing that on behalf of and under contract with the company, Monsanto. Doing work for Johnson & Johnson... The U.S. Military has been doing this on black communities inside and outside the prison. Then we look at the Japanese Americans, what we call internment, what they call mass incarceration. The internment camps that were built for Japanese American citizens during World War II, these were also exposed to a whole host of environmental conditions including heat, extreme cold, contaminated water. And many of these folks not only suffered injuries and chronic illnesses; many of them died as a result. Then we fast forward to the 1980s and groups like Mothers of East Los Angeles and other groups in California, who were fighting toxicity in the form of prisons and incineration being imposed in the same communities. [We see] the struggles for human rights and environmental justice were being linked to struggles for immigrant rights, immigrant justice and prisons reform, prison abolition. What Panagioti, what Richard Mosley and others are doing is not only pointing out these intersections but they're actually building a movement. This is a movement that is growing in this country and nationally that recognizes that environmental racism knows no borders or boundaries and it is alive and well in the prison system of this country. And there are things we can do to combat that.

Rose:...Here in California, so many prisons are in the Central Valley or they're hours away from major cities. So what happens when these prisons are built on top of a coal ash dump?

Panagioti: Well I think Richard laid it out pretty well. That specific instance in SCI Fayette in PA has been played out other places around the country from coal mines to oil and gas drilling sites. In Florida right now, we're looking at a proposed phosphate mine site that would surround an existing prison. So those things happen. What happens when a prison is built? I think it's also important to ask what happens when an industry is developed surrounding a prison and they're both similar... You have people exposed to heavy industrial contamination, air pollution, water pollution. And... one of the things we receive most commonly is letters from prisoners saying they don't know exactly what the problem is with the water but they know the guards don't drink it. And I think you mentioned also, up in Massachusetts at SCI Norfolk,

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prisoners reported that even the dogs that work with the correctional officers or that are in programs in the prisons, the dogs don't drink the tap water that prisoners have to drink and bathe in. And so there's so many unique conditions that lead to the specific environmental impact, whether it be mining or landfills or military superfund sites. But the common theme is that the water is contaminated. And that people get sick at a higher rate and have less access to medical care in the case where sicknesses are contagious; they spread rapidly. And those are all environmental health issues that on the outside of prisons, they would be taken very serious as an environmental justice epidemic. But inside prisons, behind closed doors, I think you mentioned, hours away from most major cities, people aren't hearing about them, whether it be old prisons with old pipes like we saw happening in Michigan in Flint... The Genesee county jail prisoners were exposed even longer and more extreme than a lot of the other residents in Flint, MI because they had no other choice. They couldn't up and leave; they couldn't access other water. So that's an issue all over prisons, but it's not just the old prisons... In California, for example, one of the newest prisons built in Curran Valley opened in 2005. By 2009, there were reports of high levels of arsenic because it wasn't just about old pipes. It was about a contaminated soil, likely from industrial agriculture for decades before.

Rose:...Richard, can you tell us about your work with the Fayette Health Justice Campaign and what it has been like for you to organize inmates at SCI Fayette?

Richard: Well, what happened was, when I left out, I told a lot of the people...that I would not leave them there like this. And I didn't. I just wasn't referring to the inmates. The guards are there in a bad environment, the residents are in a bad environment. So everybody's affected. But the guards are trading their health for money. And I think that area has done that for a long time because of the coal. Coal is just not a clean industry to be in. So...I got with the Abolitionist Law Center out of Pittsburgh and I got with an organization called Put People First! PA...and we started to organize. Then we formed this committee called the Fayette Health Justice Committee and me, Gabriel Rocha, Jacob Hope, and Ducky- we formed this committee where we have a newsletter out called Fayette Justice Health Issue. And we basically lay it out, my story. We lay out the facts of the background of the site and we lay out the right to have health cause a lot of people are trapped in there. And we care about the people, not just the inmates, but the staff. And we care about the guards and the residents. So we have a broad approach to how important this is cause we believe health care is a human right...So that's where we currently are.

Rose: Have you heard from any individual guards or prison administrators?

Richard: ...We met with a [high level administrator] for the whole western region of Pennsylvania right in Harrisburg. And he basically told us off the record that you guys have to keep doing what you're doing cause we're not going to change. We're an industry, a machine. So he said people like you have to force us to change cause we're not going to...And so we're committed to forcing them to change.

Rose: The Abolitionist Law Center said SCI Fayette may be unconstitutional because it's cruel and unusual punishment to put a prison on top of a coal ash dump. Richard, have you been able to talk to any politicians about this?

Richard: Well that's currently a direction we're heading [in]. We started off with our newsletter to kind of get ourselves organized, our work known. And so we're gonna' ramp up the pressure on everybody that has a hand in this...We're here to expose what's going on and make people accountable.

To listen to the full interview,
please visit <https://www.kalw.org/post/environmental-costs-prisons#stream/0>.

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