

A month of hunger

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

August 8, 2013

[The hunger strike among California prison inmates](#) is a month old today.

The state's corrections department maintains that the strike is a ploy to free up gangs to do business behind bars. But the longer this thing goes, the more ridiculous that sounds. These prisoners are putting their lives at serious risk in order to leverage their demands. And [the demands](#) are for things that it's shocking they even have to ask for:

- **End long-term solitary confinement, per the 2006 recommendations of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons.** It's been [well documented](#) (pdf) that solitary amounts to psychological torture. It's so awful that some prisoners are willing to starve to take a stand against it.
- **Do a better job determining who's in a gang, and end the "debriefing" policy.** Inmates are validated as gang members based on questionable criteria. Gang affiliation is a main reason they end up in solitary. "Debriefing" means turning others in—at great personal risk—often in return for release from solitary.
- **Stop punishing the group for an individual's rule violations.** This is a source of the sort of punitive crackdowns that land inmates in indefinite solitary in the first place.
- **"Provide adequate and nutritious food."** The inmates aren't asking for bigger/better meals than they're entitled to now. They're asking for procedural guarantees that they'll actually get the meals they're already supposed to be getting.
- **Increase programming and privileges for inmates in indefinite solitary.** Specific requests include such luxuries as an annual photo, a weekly phone call, correspondence courses and wall calendars.

Adequate food, a calendar to help keep track of the endless days, the right to not be subject to indefinite psychological torture. These are not unreasonable demands. And lacking such things makes inmates desperate enough to go on a hunger strike that, like indefinite solitary itself, has no scheduled end date.

It's tempting sometimes to think civil disobedience is dead, or that the concept has been mostly taken over by indirect actions—purely symbolic lawbreaking, complete with pre-negotiated terms to minimize personal risk. ("Bring 40 bucks and your ID," say the protest organizers. "The cops have agreed to no charges that will go on your permanent record.") But out in California there's a major nonviolent direct action happening. It's just that it's happening among a population the rest of us struggle to imagine ever being anything but violent. It's happening among people we've generally decided to dehumanize and ignore.

Which, of course, is a big part of the problem. These inmates' human rights are being violated. Perhaps officials need to be convinced that the public does in fact consider them human.