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Halifax, NS

**For immediate release: Springhill guard actions in support of PSAC strike should not harm prisoners**

The East Coast Prison Justice Society learned that prisoners at Springhill Institution, a federal correctional facility in Springhill NS, are experiencing severe deprivations, as a result of actions taken by guards in support of PSAC strike action during work hours, creating staff shortages. These actions have been happening since April 21. The harsh impacts to prisoners can and should be avoided.

The East Coast Prison Justice Society aims for the advancement of human rights of prisoners and is part of a community of social justice organizations dedicated to solidarity with those struggling for the advancement of their human rights.

Labour rights are human rights. It is important to support labour rights, including the right to strike, and for other working people to show solidarity and support for striking workers to support resolutions in favour of working people. It is important to respect picket lines.

The exercise of workers’ rights should not result in deprivations to the human rights of other people. While inconveniences to the public are inevitable in public sector strikes, the labour movement must ensure that strike action does not undermine the basic rights of vulnerable populations. There is a long tradition of workers taking action that applies pressure to their employer while defending broader public interests. For example, Canadian postal workers have routinely continued to deliver pension and social assistance cheques during labour disputes.

Prisoners are a captive population, who are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, with disproportionately higher levels of serious mental health conditions, and many other intersections of marginalization. Prisoners do not have the freedom to seek support from other sources but are entirely at the mercy of staff at their institutions.

We have learned that prisoners have not been receiving scheduled medications, including methadone, Suboxone, pain medication and anti-psychotics. Staff shortages created by guards supporting strike action has resulted in long delays in delivery of such medications. These are very serious deprivations, interfering with proper medical treatment.

Prisoners have also been forced to remain in their cells during the created staff shortages. Food delivery has been delayed. Prisoners have also been deprived of the means to prepare their own food in the Small Group Feeding units. These are serious impacts of prisoners’ liberty and security of the person.

Prisoners are also working people. Most federal prisoners work, either in institutional jobs (cooking, cleaning, maintenance, etc.), or through prison industry programs, and are engaged in manufacturing furniture, textiles, food production, etc. Prisoners need to be understood as working-class people, with their human rights defended by the labour movement. The labour movement needs to consider this in the course of strike actions that affect prisoners’ human rights.

It is important for a progressive labour movement to offer creative solutions to allow workers to support strike action, without resulting in further deprivations to those in already precarious circumstances. The goal should be to apply pressure on the employer, the federal government, while seeking to avoid deprivations of human rights to prisoners.

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