

NEW ORLEANS WORKERS' CENTER FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Testimony of Jose Pop Macz

Detainee, human rights monitor, hunger striker

Jose is a member of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. He was on the day labor corner when he was picked up by ICE agents posing as contractors. After he arrived in Basile, he began to monitor human rights conditions and detention standards in the jail. He and other human rights monitors inside the ICE jail organized day-long hunger strike on Tuesday, July 7th, 2009. The same day, he met with Workers' Center organizers inside the ICE detention center in Basile, Louisiana to report on conditions. That night, he was deported.

My name is Jose Pop Macz. I am one of the thousands of people that are incarcerated everyday in Louisiana by immigration. For 55 days I lived in an immigration jail. Each day I was there, my rights as a human being were violated.

My arrival to the South Louisiana Correctional Facility in Basile, Louisiana was unjust. In New Orleans I was a day laborer. Every morning I walked to the gas station on the corner of Martin Luther King and Claiborne Avenue, hoping that I would be lucky enough to find a job. Together with many other day laborers I would flag down homeowners and contractors and offer my services as a construction worker. I always felt proud of my work. I was helping rebuild New Orleans after hurricane Katrina destroyed thousands of peoples' homes.

One day, two men showed up and lured us to their car with offers of a well paying job. "We need two painters," they told us. None of the workers on the corner suspected it – but these men were not contractors. They were ICE agents. The agents chose my friend and I to go to "work." We piled into the car, excited about the opportunity. As we drove off, the driver asked us where we were from. As soon as we said Guatemala, they turned around and showed us their ICE badges.

My heart broke. I still owed thousands of dollars in my home country and knew that this encounter with ICE would be a huge set back for my family. I could not believe that simply looking for work would cause me so much pain and suffering.

Since immigration disappeared me from my family's life, I have not been able to communicate with them. Inside the South Louisiana Correctional Facility we were not allowed to use the telephones. When I was first locked up, I had only \$20.00 to my name. In a desperate attempt to call my family I bought two phone cards for \$10.00 each. The cards did not work. Time after

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time, I would try to call. Every time I tried they did not work. Each day that passed my depression grew deeper and deeper. My only desire was to talk to my family and tell, I am alive.

The racism inside of the jail, it stopped the guards from treating us like human beings. Their actions made it very clear: they did not respect us as people. They did not care for our health or safety. The food they gave us was not fit for human beings. It was undercooked and disgusting. We never had enough to drink. Each night we slept hungry. If we had a dollar to buy a pack of noodles, they would taunt us and not allow us to use the microwave to cook them.

Inside the jail they stripped us of our rights. They treated us like children. Behind those bars we were no longer seen as adults. Frequently, we were not allowed to talk to each other. We were constantly reprimanded. Once, a man took a shower and a guard got angry. As punishment for simply cleaning himself, he was put in solitary confinement. We call it "the hole." They put him there for two weeks. The hole changes people. When you come out, you no longer act the same.

I'm lucky. I am no longer inside that jail. But I will never forget what happened to me. 55 days like that inside will shape your life forever.

From the outside I want to support my friends who continue to suffer, suffer without their basic rights as human beings. The majority of us are parents, workers, and do not deserve to be treated like we are worthless.

I want to tell my friends in jail: stay strong. Keep fighting. The prison guards and immigration will try to break you down. But I know that every man has the strength inside to fight for what is just. The rest of us are here with you. No matter what country we are in, we will support you.