

## THE ANATOMY OF A HUNGER STRIKE

Conrad Jules Braun, December 27, 2005

*“Lord, when did I see you in prison and not minister to you?”*

A prison hunger strike is a funny thing with unexpected dynamics and not recommended for even the most stout heart or stubborn mind. First, it must be announced. Second, it must be documented.

In a jail situation the striker must refuse the food tray entirely. The alternative is to return the uneaten contents and have it documented. That simply is not possible on a jail ration in general population. Even when refusing entirely the peer pressure is tremendous with, “Hey, man, give me your tray!” or questions like, “Why are you doing this?” And repeated replies, “I am sorry but I can’t give you my tray.” And “My prosecutor, judge and sheriff know why, let’s leave it at that.”

Initially there was little peer support but as time went on my peers in Jackson County were supportive. They realized that, at least in determination, I was genuine, otherwise normal, and affectionately gave me the handle of Gandhi.

99% of all hunger strikes are broken within days, most after one meal. The psychology of staff and inmates alike is, “This will accomplish nothing.” So the initial game by staff is to keep the striker in population. But the psychology of staff, unlike inmates, is “we don’t care” which is true, so the serious striker must self document and hope staff is doing its duty. That’s right. Duty. In our Nation it is the duty of staff to keep an inmate safe from harm. It is equally essential that a serious striker be of sound mind and not suicidal.

Beyond this there is a great deal of latitude in both the striker’s and strikebreaker’s strategy and methods. Radically different techniques can be utilized to both initiate and break a strike. The essentials of American protocol is that once a hunger strike becomes serious, weight, food intake, and/or liquid intake, and non-intrusive vital signs must be adequately recorded to keep the striker safe. Use of force is prohibited without a court order.

The game is overwhelmingly weighted in favor of the strikebreaker. The breaker has all the power and ultimately the striker must depend on the strikebreaker for his own personal safety. If the strikebreaker abuses this power through excessive use of force or by deliberately forsaking the essentials of protocol, it legally constitutes an 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment violation of cruel and unusual punishment. A court order obtained by showing probable cause is required before force-feeding a striker in our Nation.

In the Soviet Union, 1960’s dissident Major General Pyotr Grigorievich Grigorenko, after announcing a hunger strike was immediately forced fed roughly with a nose tube three times daily for each meal quickly breaking the strike. Inserting and especially withdrawing the tube is not a pleasant experience. The opposite extreme,

guaranteed effective, isolates the striker in a cell depriving him of food and water entirely. Announcing a hunger strike without a connection to the outside can be lethal.

The British model, in absence of Constitutional safeguards, provides for non-intervention that results in death to serious strikers. In 1981 Irish dissident Bobby Sands was elected the Parliament during his hunger strike and subsequently died of starvation along with nine others with a protocol that backfired badly on the British government. The spectacle of public starvation created a tremendous public outcry and resulted in a huge recruitment success for the Irish Republican Army.

Currently Guantanamo Bay detainees, while protesting the lack of Geneva Convention safeguards, are receiving the Constitutional safeguards required by American hunger strike protocol and are being force fed to prevent self-harm. Interestingly, the constitutional safeguards available to Gitmo detainees are not available to the average citizen in Johnson County. See <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20051017/smith>. (It should be noted that Bibles are no longer available on the bookrack in Johnson County. They may be requested. I made a written request for both a Bible and access to the law library immediately upon my arrival but received neither. I did finally manage to procure a Bible on the bookrack in Jackson County that I kept with me.)

I announced my hunger strike on the morning of November 8, 2005 refusing trays, drinking plenty of liquids, and soon meeting Garbino Mdut greatly lifting my spirits. On November 20<sup>th</sup> I ate half the evening tray, as I could not pass up blueberry pie. I also took the Thanksgiving evening tray on November 24<sup>th</sup> and the evening tray of December 1<sup>st</sup> giving away the brownie dessert. On December 2<sup>nd</sup> I was transported to Johnson County and consumed the brown bag lunch offered in the van. During November I also determined that Jackson County had no protocol in place to deal with a hunger strike.

At Johnson County they began to weigh me daily beginning on December 5<sup>th</sup>. My weight was 211 lbs compared with 234 lbs upon arrival. I ate the evening meal of 12/6, all meals on 12/7 breakfast and lunch on 12/8 pending a court hearing for bond on appeal. While this was granted it was set too high for me to bond out so I resumed the strike on the evening of 12/8.

On December 9<sup>th</sup> I wrote an open letter to Governor Sebilius and Attorney General Kline dated December 14h demanding a force feed court order planning to mail an advance copy to [www.fairtrialsinamerica.org](http://www.fairtrialsinamerica.org) on Monday, December 12<sup>th</sup>.

At 5 a.m. of December 12<sup>th</sup> I was ordered to farm out. After mailing this letter I informed the pod officer that I was in the middle of a well-documented hunger strike and that I was refusing to farm out because Jackson County was ill prepared to deal with it and I would be in danger of serious physical injury should I farm out where I was not monitored. The policy of brutalization in Johnson County for refusal to farm out is documented separately.

On December 15<sup>th</sup> the December 14<sup>th</sup> letters were mailed. On this day I also notified Facility Administrator Livengood that I was escalating to no liquids beginning on December 19<sup>th</sup>.

I ate partial trays on 12/16 and 12/17 and three full meals on 12/18 and announced to staff on 12/18 that I was ending liquid intake. My liquid intake and vital signs were never monitored and after 4 days of minimal liquid intake and nearly 48 hours of no liquid intake, I collapsed on my cell floor on the evening of 12/24 bruising my head. On the morning of 12/25 I resumed liquid intake. My lowest weight was reached on 12/25 at 194 lbs. The strike was conducted in such a manner so as not to disrupt the institution and to call as little attention to myself as possible.

That is the physical side. But there is also a spiritual side to a strike for essentially it is a fast. The distinction is that a righteous strike is designed to gain attention while a righteous fast avoids all attention and is designed solely for the spirit.

And here may lay a personal victory. For yesterday I began to eat, today my bowels moved, and for tomorrow I pray my own goals may diminish as a ministry for those who remain may increase. "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one the least of these, you did not do it to Me."

See JOCO FORCED FARM OUT POLICY BRUTALIZES INMATES (January 14, 2006) in [News Section](#) for documentation of hunger strike.