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Statement of Support for the Free People Strike

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep inequities in all sectors of American life. The U.S. prison system, in particular, has been severely affected but also overlooked in much discourse on the effects of COVID-19. The University of Pittsburgh Student Government Board calls upon the University to release a public statement demanding Governor Tom Wolf decarcerate Pennsylvania prisons and jails and meet the demands of the [Free People Strike](#).¹ These actions are necessary to protect our communities and limit the spread of the virus. The Board was inspired by students at [Haverford College](#) who are also urging their administration to endorse this movement.²

The pandemic has turned prisons and jails into death sentences for everyone inside. Incarcerated people are unable to social distance because of the overcrowded facilities. Those infected are not given the medical care they need. Prisons have been using prolonged solitary confinement as a means of social distancing, which has long been recognized as a form of psychological torture. As a result of these failures, incarcerated people are more than five times as likely to contract the virus and three times more likely to die from it than the general population.³

Since May 28th, organizers and supporters of the Free People Strike have been participating in hunger strikes in solidarity with incarcerated people, who have been protesting the unsafe and inhumane conditions in prisons. The campaign is urging Governor Wolf to take action on this issue and begin releasing people from correctional facilities. Thus far, over 100 people have joined in the hunger striking and solidarity fasts, including multiple Pitt students and alumni. This issue is of great importance to the Pitt community, and the Student Government Board believes that the University has an obligation to take action during this dangerous moment.

The prison system does not exist in isolation; therefore, mitigating the overall COVID-19 crisis will require significant decarceration efforts. Governor Wolf has the power to protect our communities by decarcerating PA prisons and jails. Under his own April 18th reprieve order, 1800 people have become eligible for release. Less than 200 eligible people, however, have been released since that date.⁴ The Free

¹ <https://freepeoplestrike.net/>

² <http://haverfordclerk.com/haverford-must-endorse-the-free-people-strike-and-start-fighting-for-decarceration-now/>

³ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768249>

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<https://www.buckscountycouriertimes.com/story/news/state/2020/08/18/covid-19-pennsylvania-prison-inmates-corrections-jails/3363510001/>



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People Strike demands that Governor Wolf free all those eligible for release under his reprieve order. They also call on him to expand this decree in order to free as many people as possible.

In a time when Pitt is actively responding to contemporary white supremacy and racism, we must remember that the carceral state is a direct result of our nation's racist history. Students are urging the University to make stronger commitments to anti-racism and racial justice. Calling for immediate decarceration is one way Pitt can acknowledge systemic issues affecting our region and take tangible action to dismantle them.

At Pitt's 2020 Diversity Forum, Dr. Angela Davis talked about how it is impossible to weaken systems like prisons and policing without changes in the larger society, including educational systems. She emphasized that universities can and must play an important role in dismantling carceral structures. While we have much more work to do, urging Governor Wolf to take action on this issue is one small way that Pitt can show its commitment to standing against institutions of racism and white supremacy.

In Solidarity,

Eric Macadangdang
2020-2021 Student Government Board President

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2020-2021 Student Government Board