

McFarland residents vow to keep organizing after court lets GEO expand immigration detention

11/02/2020

For Immediate Release: November 2, 2020

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8-month battle to stop new detention centers galvanized hundreds; groups urging Gov Newsom to step in

McFarland, CA—On Monday, October 26th, the Ninth Circuit ruled to permanently vacate a district court's preliminary injunction in *Immigrant Legal Resource Ctr., Freedom for Immigrants v. McFarland, Geo Group, Inc.*

The preliminary injunction was initially requested by Freedom for Immigrants and the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) on behalf of local residents of the city of McFarland. The plaintiffs were arguing that the City of McFarland violated California's Dignity Not Detention Act (SB 29), a bill plaintiff's drafted and co-sponsored. Plaintiffs argued that the city of McFarland violated SB 29 when it approved without adequate community input GEO Group's request to convert two 700-bed facilities in Kern County into annexes for the Mesa Verde ICE Processing Center despite tremendous community mobilization.

The two facilities—Golden State and Central Valley—are owned by GEO Group. California's state prison system previously leased both of the facilities, but after the passage of AB 32 phasing out private prisons in the state system, Governor Gavin Newsom ended the state prison contracts early—paving the way for the possibility of a massive expansion of immigration detention in the state.

The expansion clearly goes against the will and demands of McFarland residents. In February, despite what we still believe to be improper notice, hundreds of farmworkers and community members [organized in opposition](#) to a private ICE prison in their town. While they ultimately won a vote at the city's planning commission, GEO Group worked with the city of McFarland to push through the expansion anyway, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the Ninth Circuit temporarily suspended the lower court's injunction in September, ICE opened one of the two detention centers, "Golden State." Now, with the injunction permanently vacated, both detention centers—Golden State and Central Valley—are clear to open, expanding this abusive, unnecessary system during a pandemic.

Importantly, California's SB 29, the Dignity not Detention Act of 2017, remains fully valid. California state Governor Gavin Newsom has since done nothing to stop the process or to support the people in McFarland.

"Because of this pandemic, our ability to show up in numbers and organize was very limited. This detention center isn't something that should exist in our town. We need to keep pushing. We need to keep fighting, together, as a community, so detention and separation of families isn't a reality in our city of McFarland," said **Maribel Ramirez, McFarland Resident**.

"I firmly believe that, if not for the shelter in place forced by this pandemic, there is no way the McFarland City Council could have ignored the power and will of the community that urged the Council to not choose profits over their lives. With Zoom, the Council was able to do just that, making this decision (for now) one more detrimental consequence of this pandemic. Nevertheless, the community of McFarland has inspired me and countless others by showing the power of a community with its back against the wall. This inspiration is what will keep us fighting with the residents of McFarland for as long as it takes. They are out in the community, as we speak, encouraging their eligible neighbors to get out and vote," said **Pastor Trena Turner, Executive Director, Faith in the Valley**.

"On the eve of the election, it's appalling to see the will of the people of Kern County dismissed – but the fight is not over. The McFarland community is strong and committed to continue fighting for the city government to put the needs of the people it's meant to serve first. Moreover, SB 29 remains a valid law and was instrumental in staving off the opening of these detention centers for many months," said **Grisel Ruiz, Supervising Attorney at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center**.

"Although the courts failed us and the McFarland community, the Dignity Not Detention Act remains the law of the land," said **Christina Fialho, an attorney and the co-founder/executive director of Freedom for Immigrants**. "The Dignity Not Detention Act and our accompanying lawsuit delayed the opening of the immigrant prisons by nearly 10 months, and the fight is not over. We will continue to pressure our state legislature, Governor Newsom, and our congressional representatives to divest from immigration detention and invest in true community-based alternatives."

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[Faith in the Valley](#) is a multi-faith, multi-racial coalition of over 100 Central Valley congregations, covering over 200 miles from San Joaquin to Kern counties, organizing in unity for our region's most vulnerable families and communities, and for a Central Valley that truly protects, values and includes everyone. During this pandemic and at all times, this includes the right for everyone in the Central Valley to work, live and grow in health, shelter and community.

The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) is a national nonprofit that works with immigrants, community organizations, legal professionals, and policy makers to build a democratic society that values diversity and the rights of all people. Through community education programs, legal training & technical assistance, and policy development & advocacy, the ILRC's mission is to protect and defend the fundamental rights of immigrant families and communities. www.ilrc.org

Freedom for Immigrants is devoted to abolishing immigration detention, while ending the isolation of people currently suffering in this profit-driven system. We monitor the human rights abuses faced by immigrants detained by ICE through a national hotline and network of volunteer detention visitors, while also modeling a community-based alternative to detention that welcomes immigrants into the social fabric of the United States. Through these windows into the system, we gather data and stories to combat injustice at the individual level and push systemic change. Visit www.freedomforimmigrants.org. Follow @MigrantFreedom