

People's Tribunal protests Tacoma holding center, ICE deportations

BY ASHLEY ARCHIBALD
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

One by one, speakers approached the microphone and addressed the scores of quiet witnesses gathered on the turf outside Tacoma's Northwest Detention Center, a privately run immigration prison where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) incarcerates people who live in the United States without documents.

Alternating between English and Spanish, they spoke of the people they'd met that morning who are being held in what is one of the largest detention centers in the country, waiting sometimes for months for their case to be adjudicated and a decision made on their futures. They testified about the pain caused by that uncertainty and described the trauma experienced when mothers, daughters, husbands and sons were torn from their families.

That's because Feb. 4, for the third time in as many years, it wasn't a detainee on trial under the steely gray sky — it was ICE.

"We are the ones that are going to judge them," said Maru Mora-Villalpando, an undocumented activist who has been organizing against the detention center for years. "They are not going to judge us anymore."

Called the People's Tribunal, the action is the first of up to 11 that will be held in cities across the country, ending in Denver, Colo., in protest of the practice of holding and deporting undocumented immigrants in the United States. The Tacoma event offered catharsis, and also was a centralized place to get people on the outside organized and involved with the prisoners being held.

This year felt different, Mora-Villalpando told the crowd, because it wasn't just a year to fight against fascism; it was "the year of the resistance," a title that has become associated with the liberal uprising against the presidency of Donald Trump and the xenophobic, white supremacist values that he was seen to embody when he called Mexicans rapists on the campaign trail, and reportedly referred to African countries as

"shitholes."

But Trump's racist, anti-immigrant stances have been more than rhetorical.

The administration rescinded the temporary protected status offered by the United States to refugees from home countries made dangerous by violence or natural disaster, forcing hundreds of thousands of people who have been in the United States, in some cases for almost two decades, to become undocumented and at risk of deportation if they choose to stay in the country where they have built their lives.

More than 100 undocumented immigrants who came to the country as children are losing their protected status each day as Democrats and Republicans wrangle over a legislative fix to DACA — the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program — according to an estimate by the Center for American Progress. They're now vulnerable to arrest and deportation by a government that has their home addresses.

Unlike administrations past, ICE no longer seems to discriminate between who its officers will pick up and who they will leave in peace. Rather than aim for people exhibiting criminal behavior, ICE has detained victims of domestic violence and detained a 10-year-old girl with cerebral palsy after an emergency gallbladder surgery.

Activists such as Mora-Villalpando have been targeted as well: Ravi Ragbir, an immigrants rights activist in New York, has been detained; Jean Montrevil was deported to Haiti in January. In December Mora-Villalpando received notice from ICE that the organization was launching deportation proceedings against her as well. She defiantly continues her work, leading the People's Tribunal event after her return from Washington, D.C., to watch the State of the Union speech. (Read our interview with Mora-Villalpando in the Feb. 2 edition of Street Roots, online at news.streetroots.org.)

In the face of such actions, people came to the Northwest Detention Center from near and far to stand with the people detained inside. One student group drove up from Oregon because — as Montreal Gray

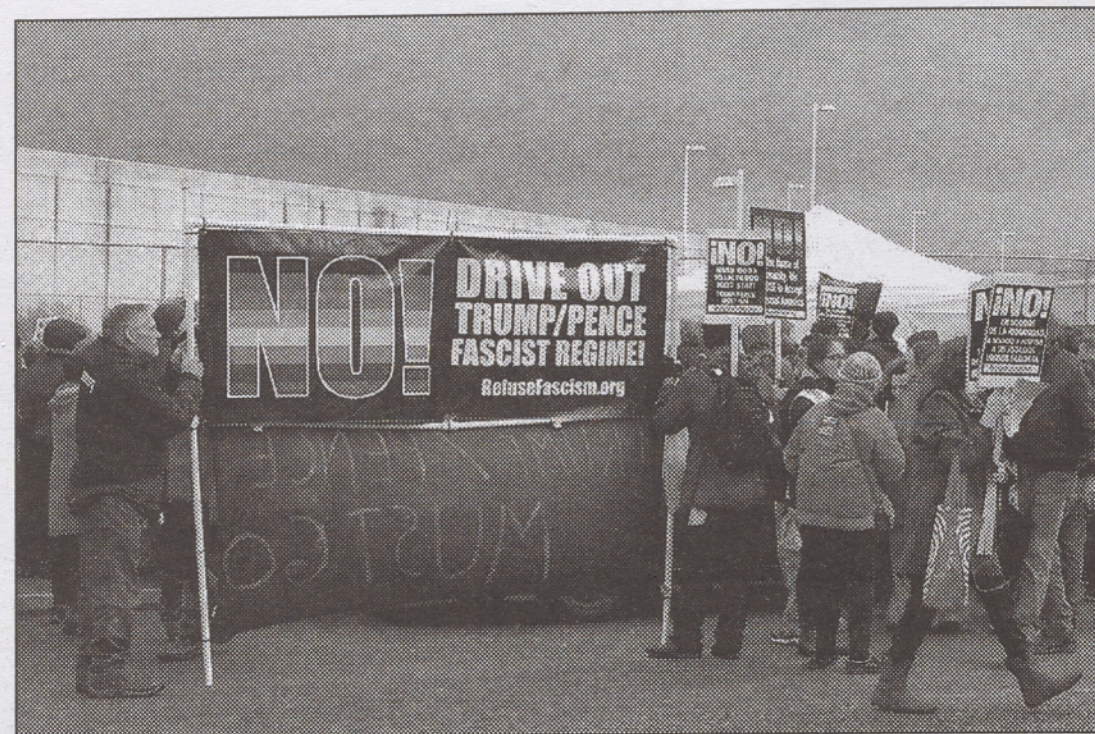


PHOTO BY ASHLEY ARCHIBALD

one of their group, put it — they wanted to be in solidarity with the detainees.

"I would want someone out here protesting for me," Gray said.

And while the people in the facility could not see protesters, they will get their words.

Fletcher Christie, a volunteer with the Northwest Detention Center Resistance, oversaw a letter-writing table where people sat and penned missives to folks inside. The organization has a pen pal program aimed at reducing the isolation that people feel when they're cut off from their support networks for months at a time.

"Some folks have been in there more than a year," Christie said. "Their mental health suffers in detention."

There has been some good news for those working against the detention center.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson filed a lawsuit against GEO Group, the private entity that runs the prison, for violating minimum-wage laws by paying detainees only a dollar a day for work done on the inside, and the city of Tacoma is considering rules that would require any expansion of the facility to be arduous.

The Trump administration has called for prisons like the Northwest Detention Center to grow.

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Protesters with the People's Tribunal demonstrate against ICE deportation policies outside the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Wash.

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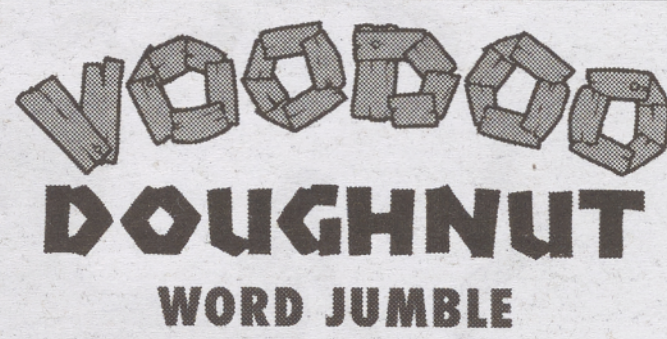


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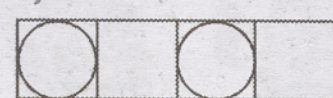


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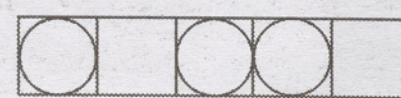
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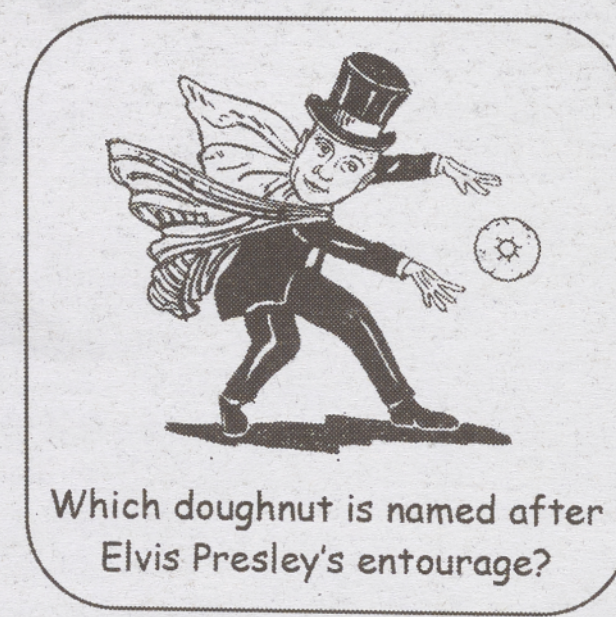
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