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Justice and Unity in the Southern Tier (JUST)

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Contacts: Jackson Hengsterman 518-779-5899, jhengsterman@gmail.com;

William Martin 917 340 0468, wgmartin1@gmail.com; Andrew Pragacz, 651-747-6316
ajrpragacz@gmail.com,

Another Hunger Strike and Appeal from the County Jail Families Demand: Feed our Loved Ones

Once again persons incarcerated in the Broome county jail have gone on a hunger strike, this week sending back meal after meal to the kitchen. Their appeal and actions add to years of reports of ill-fed, starving and brutalized people inside the jail. Families call, ask for help, demand action. Why no fruit ever? Why so little food? Why so much hunger? This is a food desert by design, filled, funded and authorized by the county and its elected officials.

None of this is new. Over five years ago JUST [wrote county legislators](#) warning them that outsourcing food services to private, for-profit corporations courted disaster. [Op-eds in the local press](#) did the same. Yet, the county legislature choose the Trinity Service Group, a company with a well-known history of providing low-quality meals, in insufficient quantities, and often featuring bugs. In Trinity facilities incarcerated people were reduced to eating toothpaste and syrup packets. Ultimately, the food was so terrible, and people so hungry, incarcerated people rebelled in several states. And then this came home to the Broome.

The single most common complaint from people inside is the food. Fruit, fresh vegetables, and eggs are unheard of in the jail. One guard told a person incarcerated in BCJ, "I wouldn't eat this S*** on your [food] tray if they paid me a whole year's salary". Folks have found metal, rocks, sticks, and maggots in their daily meals. Even worse, there's not enough of it. One incarcerated person reports, "Our food is below minimum calorie count." Visitors watch as their loved ones lose pounds a week on the jail diet. For pregnant women it's even worse. Food is also used as punishment. In one instance, milk and a cheese sandwich were purposely served to a disabled Black youth who was lactose intolerant. When he and other youth inside protested the youth put in a mechanical restraint chair, tear gassed, then left naked in a jail cell. The Sheriff and county were [sued](#) and [lost](#).

Meanwhile Trinity lives on and profits, while the county celebrates it can feed so many persons on so little money. Starving incarcerated people is good money for the Sheriff too. Pouring through the jail commissary list, JUST members [found the sheriff overcharging](#) for a packet of ramen by 560%. Kit kat bars and grape jelly were three times more expensive. The State Commission of Correction regulations require ["modest" profits to be spent on rehabilitation](#); the sheriff uses super-profits to buy lawn mower, flares, copier supplies, and basic supplies.

Despite all these warnings, protests, and lawsuits the Sheriff's Office and the Broome County Legislature have consistently been silent, refused to act. This torturous situation must end.

We endorse the demands of persons in the jail and their families for:

- Fruit and vegetables--including salads-- provided daily
- Fruit juice and eggs regularly served
- Populations with special diets should have meals consistent with their requirements. People with diabetes should have adequate food to keep on hand between meals. Pregnant women should be provided additional servings, for example.

The County Executive and County Legislators need go farther, and use their legal and financial power to

- Start regular unannounced county inspections of kitchen hygiene with public reports (as done for restaurant kitchens)
- Direct the County Health Department to supervise nutrition and jail diets with public reports
- Terminate food service by for-profit corporations, and return to a county-run kitchen
- End profiteering on commissary items and audit commissary accounts as required by law
- Use modest profits from commissary on actual rehabilitation services

Long-term, we need an independent oversight board whose powers include the responsibility to approve menus, require changes, and inspect meals.