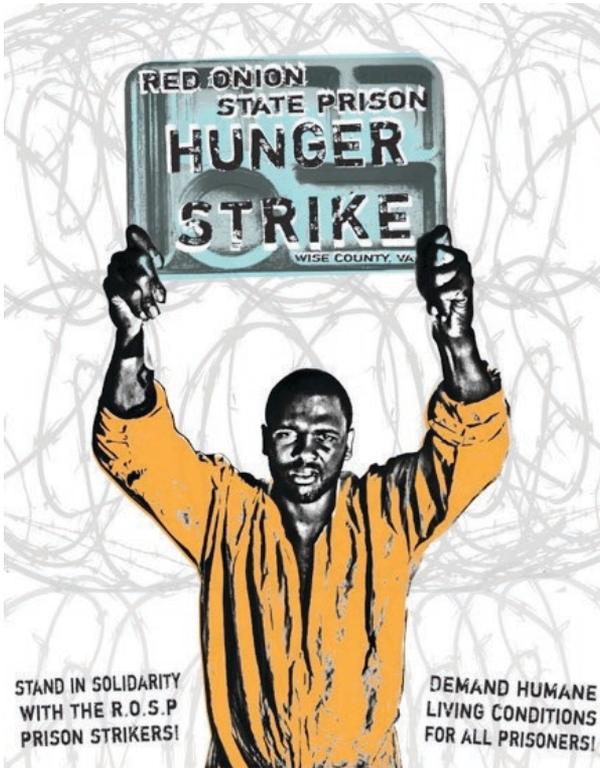


# HUNGER STRIKE AT RED ONION



**THE FINAL STRAW RADIO**  
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An interview with Shupavu wa Kirima, General Secretary of the Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party, comes on to talk to us about the ongoing hunger strike among prisoners at Red Onion State Prison in Virginia protesting the abuse of solitary confinement and the medical status of hunger striker Kevin “Rashid” Johnson. More at <https://RashidMod.Com>

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**Shupavu wa Kirima:** My name is Shupavu wa Kirima (she/her). I am the General Secretary of the Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party, also known as our IRBPP.

**TFSR:** Thanks a lot for coming back on Shupavu. I really appreciate it. The last time you were here, you told us about the denial of medical care for Kevin Rashid Johnson, incarcerated Minister of Defense for the Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party. He had been kept in the dark on his diagnosis of prostate cancer by the Ohio prison system, where he was at the time being interstate-transferred from, and then was being denied doctor visits and treatment for the condition in the Virginia prison system. My understanding is that due to the protests by Rashid and also by outside supporters that the Virginia Department of Corrections was finally forced to get him doctor's visits and treatments. But then he was whisked away to the notorious Red Onion (where he had been before), where he's been kept in solitary and had his personal effects stolen by guards. Does that sum it up to mid-December or so?

**SwK:** Yeah, that about covers it. We want to thank the public because, again, as you stated, that is the only reason why Rashid was able to receive the medical treatment and the attention to his prostate cancer that he did at that time, because people turned out in droves to support. What we find ourselves dealing with at this point, though, is that the treatments have become really expensive for the Virginia Department of Corrections, or specifically the prison where he was located, Sussex I. What has led us to this most recent turn of events is that they told him: "We're not spending any more money on this. You're too expensive and so we're gonna get you out of here". This is what Rashid was able to tell me that they told him. In the course of his receiving the radiation treatments for the cancer, it was also uncovered that he has congestive heart failure. The cancer doctor referred him to a specialist for his heart to follow that up. And none of that has happened. He hasn't seen anyone about the heart condition and was told very matter-of-factly that he would not be seeing anyone and that they are not spending any more money on him. At that point, there was a street weapon planted in his cell. This was the pretext to get him out of Sussex I, so that they would no longer be responsible for his medical care and the expenses associated with that. It was a weapon that was not even something that was made or constructed inside of a prison. It was something that could have only been brought into the institution by the staff that was planted in his cell, a brand new cell that he was moved to—I want to add that. So, he was moved to a new cell and immediately upon getting to the new cell, this weapon was discovered. Then they basically roughed him up, trying to restrain him and get him out of the cell and ready for transport.

Rashid has retained a lot of fluid and gained a lot of weight just because of the medical conditions. There was and still is a doctor's order on file for him to have extra large cuffs. So, during this whole process, while they were grabbing

him after this weapon had been planted, and they were trying to move him from the cell and get him ready for transport, he asked several time: “Can I have cuffs to fit my wrists? There’s a medical order for that.” They refused it, and they used the smaller cuffs which caused some damage and injury to his wrist because of the swelling. Then they went and took the medical order out of his file to cover their tracks. Thankfully, Rashid is pretty quick and smart, and he had sent a copy of that medical order out of the prison to a supporter, so we have proof that there was in fact at one point a medical order on file. This is what led us to where we are now in a struggle with Red Onion. He was sent back to the notorious Red Onion state prison, and he is being housed under what is known as restorative housing, which is just a euphemism for long-term solitary confinement. They use this new word, restorative housing, basically to skirt the fact that they’re still subjecting people to long-term solitary, despite changes in the law that have recently occurred in Virginia trying to not so much ban but to put limitations on the use of long-term solitary. This is where we find ourselves at this point.

**TFSR: Yeah, so Rashid and other prisoners at Red Onion have initiated a hunger strike as of December 26 to call attention to and stop the use of solitary confinement in this manner there.**

**Can you talk about why you use the term notorious for Red Onion? I wonder if you could talk about why it’s so well known, what Rashid’s history with the institution is, and what the conditions are like there.**

**SwK:** The conditions at Red Onion State Prison are probably some of the most brutal in the country. If memory serves, it is one of the only two supermax prisons in the state of Virginia, Red Onion and Wallens Ridge being the other. Where do we begin? These prisons are typically constructed in very rural, out-of-the-way, mountain regions of the state. They’re typically all-white “sundown towns.” The only Black population in these towns is typically the prisoner population that they bring in from other areas of the state. It is constructed in this way because it’s supposed to be basically an assault on the senses and an assault on your spirit. It’s meant to break people, specifically, people of color. The guards and staff are usually very hostile, very racist, and with backward beliefs. A lot of them are openly white supremacists. It’s not anything that’s concealed. It’s not uncommon for the prisoners to be beaten and to be called [n-word]. It’s not even something that they’re trying to conceal. It’s very openly hostile, openly racist, and openly abusive. Rashid has a long history of being held at Red Onion previously. It’s the site of much of the abuse that he’s written about—being stripped naked and beaten, shackled to tables and left for days having to urinate and defecate on himself, being kept in a solitary room in the dead of a winter with the windows broken out to lower the temperature in the room just to basically sub-freezing levels. The most heinous types of abuse and torture that you can imagine, this has occurred in Red Onion. So now he has been returned to this place and held in long-term solitary.

He’s also being held without any way to contact outside support or loved

ones. And this has happened without any type of hearing, just to be clear. There's been no hearing process. They just whisked him away and locked him away. He has no email, so people who are used to contacting Rashid on JPay and sending messages and corresponding that way have been stopped. There are no visits, not even video visitation. I tried to schedule one—they emailed me that it was approved, and then immediately, I got the notification, and as soon as I went to check it, there was another email saying that the approval had been rejected. So we are not able to see Rashid, we haven't laid eyes on him, he hasn't been able to get any of his articles or political work out to the public. This is purposeful. They're doing this because Rashid, his voice, and his pen have been the biggest threat to the system as it exists. This basically is an attack on the whistle-blowers. This is an attack on prison journalism. I can't stress that enough: this is all retaliatory.

**TFSR: On December 28, Rashid was able to get some words out, or at least some of his words were able to make it to his blog. It featured this article about how the state of Virginia had repeatedly violated not only a 2023 policy creating a process for a limitation to the use of segregated housing, isolation, or solitary confinement in the Virginia Department of Corrections system as well as other older rulings on the subject by state, federal, and international courts. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about this article about the law that was passed in Virginia. It's obviously still solitary confinement, it's still a form of torture, but what the Virginia government supposedly said and did earlier in 2023, and what's not being practiced when referring to that by one of their prisons in the Red Onion case.**

**SwK:** So, the first thing to understand about the law that was passed is that it was stripped down a lot. There was already some dismay about it. They really took the teeth out of the original piece of legislation. What it did do was that it supposedly put kind of blockers in place. It calls for, I believe, is that a person cannot stay there longer than 15 days, and even during that time, they have to be offered recreational activities, they have to have opportunities to be with other people. Because long-term solitary is just an assault on the senses, and in some cases, has even been shown to physically shrink portions of the brain. This is a torturous practice. So, this law basically sought to just put some stoppers in place that would allow people to have kind of breaks from the excruciating monotony of being isolated. It was also calling for officials to document every so often the reason for the individual being in long-term solitary, and they would have to justify every few days or so for its continued use.

None of this is happening in Rashid's case. Like I said, previously, there wasn't even a hearing. He was taken from Sussex I, brought about six or seven hours away to Red Onion State Prison, and he was immediately isolated and has been since that time. Right now he's currently in the medical wing, at least he was there the last time that I was able to get word from him, which was a few days ago, earlier in the week. There's been no recreation, no opportunities to have interac-

tions with other people other than guards, who are most often taunting or making things difficult for him.

I want to also mention that since this hunger strike happened on December 26, 2023, one day after Christmas, Rashid has lost close to 30 pounds. The last count several days ago, when I heard word from him, he had missed 63 documented meals. This is someone who is still fighting cancer and has congestive heart failure, which is untreated. And then, from time to time, he'll take water, and then he'll even go off of water for a few days. So I can't stress enough how dangerous, what he and other individuals who are participating are doing, but particularly for Rashid, because of his health conditions.

**TFSR: Yeah, that's an important point to hit on. And also for someone who is in such a precarious medical state... that almost makes what's going on sound like it's accidental, right? Or taking some of the agency from him putting himself in harm's way to challenge this unjust practice that he and others are suffering from. But also, as you said, he has been denied communication. People on the outside who have been legally recognized the right to communication around his health and well-being are not getting communication about the status of where he's at, which part of the facilities he's in, if he's going to a doctor, that sort of stuff too, right?**

**SwK:** Absolutely. I'm really happy that you pointed that out. The only information that I'm getting is coming from other prisoners who find a way to reach me or who have family members who find a way to reach me. I'm actually listed as Rashid's power of attorney. He has signed medical release forms, all types of documentation listing me as someone that the prison can give information to. Yet, when I call to inquire about what's going on with him, to inquire about his health, in some cases I'm told: "We don't know who that is," or "We know who that is, but we don't know of any hunger strike that's happening." I've been told that they're not going to give me any information because they're not authorized to. I tell them: "Well, you are because Rashid has signed these documents, and I'm listed as someone you can give information to." Even when we take the proper steps, and we try to go through the proper channels, they are basically just thumbing their nose at the rules. They don't care. They are refusing to recognize any legitimacy to anything that we do to try to get information on or to check on Rashid.

This is what we're dealing with and here's no one to hold them accountable, other than the public. That's why the support of Rashid and the other individuals who are on hunger strike is so critical, the outside support. Just calling and emailing from the public is so critical because these people care nothing about anything else. As long as they can keep this contained to just a few of us on the inside or activist circles and things like that, they're not concerned. We have to get widespread public support to look into this issue, but also just to understand the plight of prisoners in this country. I've said this before: there has to be a mass movement. We have to build a mass movement to humanize the people behind the walls. And

that's a big task. A lot of people feel that if you don't want to be abused or tortured, don't go to prison. That's just such an incorrect stance. We've got so much work to do in educating the public.

**TFSR: Absolutely. Do you have a sense of how Red Onion's warden, Rick White, and the staff there have been reacting to the hunger strike, which, from the start, as far as I'm aware, has doubled in size in terms of participants? And how has the state administration responded to people calling and emailing in concerns about the safety of the hunger strikers and everyone's suffering isolation there?**

**SwK:** Pretty much the typical response, when there is a response is, "We'll look into it." They'll say, "We aren't permitted to give specifics, but we'll look into it." I do know that the officials inside the prison have formed a hunger strike committee, even though some of them will tell you that they're not aware of a hunger strike happening. It's been documented that they have formed a hunger strike committee that I think includes the warden and a few other officials. They have actually taken the stance that they have been restricting water to the hunger strikers. They have turned off access to the water so that the hunger strikers in many cases have to drink from the toilet to get water. We know this because we have an attorney that Rashid was able to speak to on legal call, a little bit more than a week ago. He was able to relay that they were drinking from the toilet. They're drinking water from toilets, because they've restricted their access to fresh water, to faucets and things like that, as long as they maintain this hunger strike. So to answer your question, the warden and these officials are absolutely complicit in this. This is not something that they're just turning a blind eye to. They're not guilty of neglect, they're guilty of actively participating in the torture and abuse of these individuals.

**TFSR: How can listeners help Rashid and the other prisoners suffering from the abuse at Red Onion and those on hunger strike?**

**SwK:** What listeners can do is call and email the Virginia Department of Corrections. I believe those numbers and emails have been provided. We're also asking that people call and email the governor's office because this is way bigger than Red Onion. Rashid told me: "Do not waste your time trying to contact Red Onion," and I don't. The only time I contact them at this point is when I'm trying to find out the status of his health.

Please, please, please call, email the Department of Corrections, the governor's office. If you have contacts to media, we want the media involved—local or national. Whatever you can do to get more attention on this issue. This is a huge issue that's been going on since the day after Christmas. It's January 20th. They've been without food for almost a month. I can't even imagine. Anything that we can do to shed more light on this is the thing to do. I said it before in another conversation I had with a comrade, I want people to get creative, make this a social thing. There's

so much strength in collective organizing, so if you've got friends and family, have maybe an email or letter-writing night. Get everybody together, feed people snacks, write letters, write emails, come together, and do phone banking in your homes. We have to get together, collectively. They can pick us off one by one, but if we organize together, that's when we become a force. We become a real force together. That's what I would tell people and urge people to do.

**TFSR: Yeah, and as you said, just to pick on the point—as horrible as the situation is at that prison for these individuals: that the state can act at a level with impunity and just amplify in isolation and without oversight, the existing repressive systems of white supremacy and classism and all the things that prisons already do in our society. This is just allowing it to happen in the shadows. And as imperfect as the state of Virginia's proposal to put limitations on but still allow for extreme isolation to exist, this is still the line between life and death for a lot of people.**

**SwK:** That's right. And that can't be stressed enough.

I would encourage people to really look into what the prison system in this country is. What it really is. It's not about preventing crime, it's not about rehabilitation. I urge people to get educated and get involved. Things won't change until the public's perception of what this thing is changes. I'm confident that that can happen. So yeah, I would just urge people: really educate yourself. Especially for those of us who organize, it's so easy for any one of us to find ourselves in a situation like Rashid and others. So when you're sitting at home, and you're thinking that if you don't want to face these types of conditions, then just don't go to jail, then think about what that really means and think about how much power the state has. Think about how much power they truly have. This could be any one of us.

**TFSR: Shupavu wa Kirima, thank you so much for having this conversation. Are there good places where people can get further information, either from Rashid, from you, or the RIBPP?**

**SwK:** Absolutely. So people can go and check out more of Rashid's writings, also his history with Red Onion State Prison and other prison systems in this country at [rashidmod.com](http://rashidmod.com). That's his website. And if people want to get in contact or be a part of this effort, or anything else that we're doing, they can contact me. I am on Facebook, Shupavu wa Kirima. You can also email me at [shupavu.wa.kirima@gmail.com](mailto:shupavu.wa.kirima@gmail.com). Please reach out. Even if you don't have any experience, or you don't know where to start, if you just want to do something, reach out to me. We can figure it out together. All hands on deck. It's time that we all get involved in this thing.

**TFSR: Thanks for taking the time to chat. My heart goes out to Rashid and the other folks who are struggling and those who love him.**

**SwK:** Absolutely. I really appreciate you. Thank you comrade for always being ready to extend the platform and give us a voice. This is huge because this is what they're trying to do—they're trying to limit our reach and basically stifle our voice. So comrades like you that allow us to come on and put this message out to the world, the value of that can't be overstated. We really appreciate your solidarity. I want to thank you as well.

**TFSR: Thank you. Solidarity back. That means a lot.**

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