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New court date set for state's lawsuit against Tacoma ICE detention

A federal judge has set a new trial date for a lawsuit filed by the Washington Attorney General's Office against a privately-run Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility in Tacoma. The lawsuit dates back to a complaint filed against the private contractor running the prison in 2017, claiming that it had been "unjustly enriching itself" on the labor of detainees, and that detainees be paid minimum wage for work performed at the facility. Previously, they had been paid \$1 a day for cooking, cleaning, and laundry services, despite minimum wage at the time being \$12 an hour. After four years, the case finally went to trial last month, culminating in 11 days of proceedings and a hung jury. Because the jury couldn't come to a decision, a new trial date has been set for Oct. 12, 2021. The Tacoma facility is Washington's only private detention center, having been at the center of more than one controversy in recent years. That includes an incident in April 2020, where 50 inmates at the facility participated in a hunger strike, spelling out the letters "SOS" in the yard of the detention center with their bodies. That marked the third hunger strike in as many weeks that month, including 300 people who participated during the first week of April. The facility has also faced accusations of administering inadequate medical care, and keeping detainees in solitary confinement for inappropriately long periods of time.

Approximately 65% of the population in the Northwest Detention Center has a "non-criminal" background; they were detained at the southern border and transferred to Washington to await the outcome of their immigration cases. Roughly 30% of those detainees are from Mexico, the next largest group is from India, and then the "northern triangle" of Central America. Earlier in 2021, state lawmakers passed a measure formally banning private prisons, specifically targeting the Tacoma facility for closure. The bill allows the facility to remain open through the end of its contract with ICE, which expires in 2025. That saw the facility's private contractor file a lawsuit against the state last spring, alleging that the newly-passed bill conflicts with the federal government's "detention efforts within Washington's borders."