Inmates' protest triggers work stoppage at Angola

By JAMES MINTON and JOHN SEMIEN
Advocate staff writers

ANGOLA — Hundreds of inmates stopped working in the fields Tuesday at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in a strike triggered when two inmates refused to work on a table for lethal injection executions at the prison, corrections officials said.

Warden John Whitley said 354 of Angola’s approximately 5,200 inmates were placed in “administrative lockdown” for refusing to work, beginning Monday with two convicts assigned to the prison’s metal fabricating shop.

Thirty-seven of the shop’s laborers balked at working Tuesday morning, and more than 300 farm workers joined the protest after lunch Tuesday.

Corrections attorney Annette Viator said the inmates told authorities they were refusing to work in support of the two inmates who initially protested.

“What you’ve got is a small group that is protesting and a number joined in,” the warden added.

“With all the controversy, I believe I’ll have it (the execution table) made somewhere else,” he said.

Louisiana switches to lethal injection as its means of carrying out the capital punishment on Sept. 15.
The protest began less than 24 hours after convicted murderer Andrew Lee "Flash" Jones was executed in the state's electric chair for the 1984 rape and murder of an 11-year-old Scotlandville girl.

Two executions are scheduled between now and Sept. 15.

Whitley said three inmates were treated for injuries at Angola's hospital after "they tried to fight security officers and lost."

The warden said the security guards, who were supported by members of Angola's tactical unit, showed restraint in subduing the trio.

"I was right there; no excessive force was used," he said.

Viator said she believes other factors caused the inmates in the field to join the protest, which prison authorities call a "work stoppage."

"Two of them honestly did say that they refused to work on that and then there's been a sympathy buck from the field saying they (field workers) sympathize with these people who refused," Viator said.

"...I think you have to factor in the incredible July heat into this," she said. "I'm sure the first two inmates refused to work because they couldn't work on something dealing with lethal injection."

"But when you have 400 people in the fields, it's hard for me to believe that all 400 have closely-held beliefs about lethal injection."

A thermometer mounted on a shaded wall of Angola's visitor reception center read 91 degrees at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Viator said prison regulations allow authorities to place inmates who refuse direct orders from guards in lock-down. She said inmates can refuse orders from prison authority that could result in their immediate bodily harm.

"That's not the case here," she said. "It's a matter of prison security and discipline, which the warden has every right to expect to be able to enforce."

Viator said corrections authorities discussed the situation with U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola, who oversees a lawsuit against state prisons that is now in consent decree. She said

The judge gave permission for prison authorities to take action to stop the protest and "isolate the trouble makers."

Polozola issued an emergency court order Tuesday lifting population restrictions on cell blocks at Angola in response to a request by corrections authorities.

Deputy Warden Richard Peabody said a group of field workers refused to come out of their dormitories after lunch, while others who were forming farm lines walked back to their dormitories.

Security officers went to each dormitory, checking the inmates against the day's duty roster. Those who had refused to work were handcuffed and transported in buses to lock-down cells.

Disciplinary hearings will be scheduled to decide punishment for the strikers, Peabody said, adding the work stoppage was the prison's most serious strike "since 1982 or '83."

Polozola's order allows Angola officials to double- or triple-bunk prisoners in the lock-down cells - "whatever's reasonable; we're not packing them in like sardines," Peabody said.

He said the protest was limited to Angola's Main Prison, a sprawling complex of dormitories and auxiliary buildings that houses about 2,000 inmates. Farm lines worked as usual from the prison's outcamps, except those recalled to free their guards for duty at Main Prison.

Whitley said officials initially locked up 323 farm workers, but later returned eight to their dormitories "because they weren't involved."

Angola's farm lines average between 1,300 and 1,400 inmates, Peabody said, with Main Prison contributing about 600 to the labor pool.

"Inmates are sent here to do hard labor," Peabody added. "When they refuse, they are disciplined and locked up."

Attorney Sarah Ottinger of the Death Penalty Resource Center at Loyola University in New Orleans, said on Tuesday she does not think prison authorities should require inmates to work on equipment that will be used for executions.

"I think it was callous and inhumane for prison personnel to expect prisoners to build an instrument of death for fellow prisoners," Ottinger said. "I think all of the people in this state have something to learn from Angola inmates and their respect for humanity."

The center is a federally-funded law office that provides free representation for death row inmates during their federal appeals.