



# Amnesty International



## Group 524

March 2021

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### No March Meeting Andrea Sahouri Acquitted! AIUSA Updates

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#### Andrea Sahouri Acquitted!

Last year, we wrote letters on behalf of Andrea Sahouri, a reporter for the *Des Moines Register*, who was arrested while covering a Black Lives Matter protest. Please see the news on her court victory on page 2.

#### New AIUSA Executive Director

Paul O'Brien has been named as new Executive Director for AIUSA. Please see the statement on page 3.

#### ICE Detention Focus During President Biden's First 100 Days

Continuing our work from last month concerning ICE detention practices, there is an action aimed at ending the use of private-run prison facilities detailed on page 4 and a model letter to Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas on page 5.

#### AGM Local Group Narrative

As part of the Annual General Meeting of AIUSA, held this month, commemorating Amnesty's International's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, local groups were asked to detail their experiences during 2020. Group 524's is reprinted on page 6.

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Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.  
Meeting Location: Providence Heights  
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Belch ([joheb@aol.com](mailto:joheb@aol.com) or 412-766-1894) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA web site ([www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)) and Group 39's Amnesty Pittsburgh web site ([www.amnestypgh.org](http://www.amnestypgh.org)).

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## A Victory for Press Freedom - Andrea Sahouri Found Innocent

On March 10, 2021 a jury found Andrea Sahouri not guilty of misdemeanor charges connected to her work as a reporter for the *Des Moines Register* during a protest last year. Her case was the subject of a letter writing action during we had in 2020.

*“The charges against Andrea Sahouri represent a clear violation of press freedom and fit a disturbing pattern of abuses against journalists by police in the USA. It’s deeply troubling that the prosecutor would push these bogus charges all the way to trial,”* said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas director at Amnesty International.

On the night of May 31, 2020, police in the city of Des Moines, Iowa, pepper-sprayed, arrested, and detained Andrea Sahouri while she was reporting on a Black Lives Matter protest, even after she yelled “I’m press, I’m press.”

Police ordered protesters to disperse and used pepper spray against them. Ms. Sahouri, who said she identified herself as a reporter, was arrested along with her then-boyfriend, Spenser Robnett, who had accompanied her that day.

US authorities prosecuted Andrea Sahouri on charges of “failure to disperse” and “interference with official acts.” The prosecutor had insisted on moving ahead with a trial for two simple misdemeanors, which could result in a fine, a 30-day jail sentence, or both. Ms. Sahouri, 25, pleaded not guilty to the misdemeanor charges of failing to disperse and interference with official acts, each punishable by up to 30 days in jail.

During the trial, Carol Hunter, the *Register's* executive editor, testified that Sahouri was doing her job that day and had been working with editors not on the scene to determine where she should be positioned. She said Sahouri did not violate any *Des Moines Register* policy the night of her arrest.

On Wednesday March 10, a six-person jury found Ms. Sahouri and Mr. Robnett not guilty of both charges.

“I’m thankful to the jury for doing the right thing,” Ms. Sahouri said in a statement after the verdict. “Their decision upholds freedom of the press and justice in our democracy.”

Carol Hunter, executive editor of the *Register*, said on Wednesday that she was grateful the jury saw the case as an unjust prosecution of a reporter doing her job.



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## New Executive Director for AIUSA

Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) announced the appointment of Paul O’Brien as its new Executive Director, following an extensive global search that led the Board of Directors to unanimously pick O’Brien to assume the leadership of AIUSA. O’Brien, who officially joins AIUSA on April 15, brings a wealth of experience in international leadership, coming to the organization after 14 years at Oxfam America where he oversaw campaigning, policy, and advocacy.

O’Brien is joining AIUSA at a time of both great opportunity and unprecedented challenges to human rights in the U.S. and around the world. While the Biden administration has taken welcome steps to address human rights abuses and harmful policies affecting communities here and abroad, O’Brien and AIUSA will continue to advocate for a much bolder, transformational strategy that places human rights at the forefront of all domestic and foreign policies.

“I grew up overseas admiring Amnesty International as the voice of the human rights movement and have seen the organization as a beacon of hope for human rights activists ever since. I feel honored that my decades-long journey working to advance human rights has led me to Amnesty International USA and its incredible team of advocates,” **said Paul O’Brien, incoming Executive Director of Amnesty International USA.** “More than ever, we will need the energy of Amnesty’s millions of supporters to make our full agenda for human rights a reality, and I can’t wait to see what we accomplish together.”

“I know Paul is the right leader for Amnesty International USA in this moment. He is someone who believes in the promise of what the U.S. can be, but understands how deeply its government has failed to live up to its international obligations when it comes to human rights in recent years” **said Reza Fakhari, Board Chair of Amnesty International USA.** “We are excited about his vision of shared leadership and commitment to listening to and fostering diverse perspectives across the organization.”

As O’Brien takes the helm of AIUSA, he will focus on immediately expanding the organization’s impact in this new chapter for the organization, strengthening AIUSA’s ability to maximize its impact in the years and decades to come, and doubling down on the organization’s commitment to be a partner to communities who are confronting abuses and in the struggle to claim their human rights.



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## **ACT: END FOR-PROFIT DETENTION FACILITIES**

President Biden recently signed an executive order to phase out private prisons used by the Bureau of Prisons — but that order DOES NOT apply to the privately-run facilities used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The vast majority of people under ICE custody are detained in immigration detention facilities owned or managed by private prison corporations, which have a well-documented record of harsh conditions and negligent care. Thousands of people and families are languishing in these immigration detention facilities.

For-profit detention fuels human rights abuses. Amnesty has exposed the horrifying conditions in immigration detention: lack of physical distancing, overcrowding, inadequate hygiene, and negligent medical care, making them tinderboxes for the spread of COVID-19.

Additionally, Black and Brown people, who make up the majority of those detained, have long faced added discrimination and other human rights abuses at the hands of ICE. Again and again, they bear the brunt of harsh, punitive enforcement policies and practices anchored in detention and powered by private prison companies.

Our leaders must immediately free immigrants and asylum-seekers. Family detention must end once and for all, and we must stop the use of private prison companies for immigration detention. **T**ell Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas to act decisively to reset the immigration detention system — moving from a punitive system to one based on humanity, compassion, fairness, and respect.

Group 524  
March 2021



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The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
Department of Homeland Security  
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE  
Washington DC 20528-0525

I write to you to urge you to act on the promise of President Biden's immigration agenda by building an immigration enforcement system based on humanity, compassion, fairness, and respect. As initial steps, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should release people in immigration detention through an affirmative file review process with a presumption of liberty, end family detention, and end the use of facilities run by private prison companies and county jails for immigration detention.

DHS should adopt guidance based on the presumption of liberty for people in the immigration system, and that commits to individualized consideration of release for all people in ICE custody. No one should be detained for seeking safety or detained solely because of their immigration status. Families should never be separated, and children should live in freedom with their families as they pursue their right to seek safety.

The policy and practice of family detention should be ended immediately, and all three family detention facilities closed. DHS should also move to close detention facilities with the most egregious records of human rights abuses.

For-profit detention should be ended. Human rights violations are linked to for-profit detention, which have a well documented record of harsh conditions and negligent care, and lack of accountability.

DHS should develop and implement a plan to phase out Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) contracts with private prison companies, as well as contracts with state and local prisons and jails for immigration detention. Facilities with the worst records for negligent and abusive care and conditions and lack of accountability should be prioritized in phasing out contracts. DHS should end the use of state and local prisons and jails and other criminal incarceration facilities for immigration detention altogether.

Thank you for your urgent action.

Sincerely,



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### **AGM Local Group Narrative**

As part of the Annual General Meeting of AIUSA, held this month, local groups were asked to detail their experiences during 2020. The write-up for Group 524 is reprinted below. If anyone is interested in the full document that includes 31 local groups across the US, let me know, I can email you the full PDF.

#### ***Local Group 524—Pittsburgh North Hills, PA***

*AI Group 524 located in the North Hills area of Pittsburgh, PA, faced more than a few challenges in 2020. From the pandemic shut down of our monthly in person meetings to the unexpected passing of our long-time Group leader John Warren, we had a lot to contend with during this, our 30th anniversary of activism in Amnesty International. John Warren led our small but active group for almost all of its existence and his loss was a deep shock to us all.*

*Our last POC case had ended with the death of the Vietnamese Supreme Patriarch Tich Quang Do and we were starting to focus on the Uigher situation in China when the pandemic struck. Our group has an older membership that is not as tech-savvy as most others so virtual meetings were not as successful as we hoped. We publish a monthly newsletter to our members and give at least one letter writing opportunity to work on. Usually these are taken from active AI campaigns or items from the Local Group Weekly Updates. Each year we cooperate with Group 39 Pittsburgh on their larger events and this year, those that could, participated in their virtual December Write for Rights events and contributed to their letter total. We expect to continue these efforts in 2021 to start our 4th decade of Amnesty activism and can't wait to see each other in person when it's possible.*

*(Submitted by John Belch)*