

Prison Labor: The Price is Right

submitted by Abraham Galvan

Those politicians who are working so hard to solve our social problems have actually found a way to slow the flight of US jobs to developing nations — by developing our state prisons instead. Between 1990 and 1995 more than 30 states made it legal to contract prison labor to private companies. These new laws reversed those enacted at the beginning of the century that abolished forced labor in US prisons.

State and private prisons are rushing to join the trend. Oregon Prison Industries, a state-run operation, sold \$4.5 million worth of its prison-made blue jeans, "Prison Blues". The California DOC's competing line, "Gangsta Blues", is being marketed in Japan.

Trendy Eddie Bauer gets sweatshirts made by Washington state prisoners and wooden rocking horses from Tennessee convicts. Trans World Airline reservations are made at the Ventura, California youth facility. Prisoners at a Texas prison run by the private Wackenhut company assemble and repair computer circuit boards eventually sold to IBM, Dell, and Texas Instruments. The Austin contractor, Lockhart Technologies, Inc., sold its plant and fired 150 freeworld workers in order to relocate to the prison. The list grows every month.

Prisoners have a variety of responses to the trend. Private industry in some cases is required to pay minimum wage. Even with 80% of this wage deducted for "cost of imprisonment", taxes and victim's compensation and restitution, there is usually more "take home" pay than there is in state prison work. Many prisoners with privatized jobs are able to send support home, and to buy their own commissary items. "The chow-hall food is outrageous, so if you want to eat well or smoke you're thankful," said a San Quentin prisoner working for a private data-processing company.

A Missouri prisoner transferred to a privately-run jail in Texas wrote that "If they choose you to work for them they give special privileges. Workers get three hot meals a day, as opposed to two — and very small portions — for regular inmates. Those workers are also allowed to smoke at any time, as opposed to one hour a day for everyone else."

Prison workers hope to be learning skills for employment on release. But one private employer admitted that "I think those people are not going to get jobs like those they're doing here," since

most of the freeworld people he employed prior to moving his business inside were immigrant women.

Private business is very enthusiastic about the prospects for prisoner labor. One contractor in Texas pays \$1 a year rent for a prison factory room, which is maintained by the state. "Usually when you work in the free world," he said, "you have people call in sick, they have car problems, they have family problems. We don't have that here." The state pays for workers' compensation and medical care, and prisoners don't earn retirement pensions or vacations. A company in Washington state also pays \$1 a month in rent and gets other subsidized benefits, such as security. TWA officials point out that "prisoners are not going to be late for work because of a traffic jam on the highway." In fact, prisoners worked 12-hour days for TWA when its main office in Los Angeles was closed during the rebellion that followed the 1992 Rodney King verdict.

A recent report found that "companies are attracted to working with prisons because inmates represent a readily available and dependable source of entry-level labor that is a cost-effective alternative to the work forces found in Mexico, the Caribbean Basin, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Rim countries." The report quoted one executive who boasted, "We can put a Made-in-the-USA label on our [prison-labor] product."

What is the difference between US prison labor and the forced labor from, say, Chinese prisoners that our government righteously protests? As the Oregon Prison Industries' Marketing Director says, "Perhaps it smacks of old-fashioned imperialism to be making those kinds of judgements."

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Wisconsin's inmate population needs jobs to contribute toward the cost of their incarceration. The Department of Corrections—working with private business and state labor unions—are looking beyond the conventional prison industry program to find new ways to achieve this goal.

New legislation permits "...three private businesses to employ prison inmates to manufacture products or components or to provide services for sale on the open market." Companies establishing operations within a correctional institution can now create inmate jobs to help build private businesses—not compete with them or organized labor.

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