Modern Day Slavery

“Black Sufi”

Today’s prisoners are chained by more than physical security measures. They are also chained by the tunnel vision of lawmakers, the disinterest of the public, and the policies of the Department of Corrections (DoC). The DoC’s policies and priorities are supposed to center around care, custody, and control of inmates, but the rule-changes over the last couple of decades illustrate a focus on control, repression, and profit. Although slavery was supposedly outlawed more than 150 years ago, a clause in the 13th Amendment to the Constitution actually kept slavery alive—through prisons! The 13th Amendment reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Although slavery was supposedly outlawed more than 150 years ago, a clause in the 13th Amendment to the Constitution actually kept slavery alive—through prisons! Starting after the Civil War and going all the way up to today, the criminal “justice” system creates slave labor by funneling mostly people of color and poor people into prisons. On road crews, prisoners handle a lot of the hardest work for the city for free. Who cleans and maintains most prisons? It’s usually the prisoners, and they do not receive a dime. According to a report by Global Research, 37 states have made it legal for prisons to hire out prison labor to private corporations. Many, such as IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, Revlon, and Target Stores, are taking advantage of the cheap labor.

Officers Abuse Power

Inmates face all kinds of injustices. The public officials generally turn a deaf ear to their complaints. Some officers are notorious for unnecessary use of force against inmates. I’ve witnessed one officer at Florida’s Gulf Correctional Institution slap seven inmates in a row. I’ve seen captains falsify incident reports to justify using chemical agents on inmates in confinement. Public officials are usually informed of these problems via grievances and phone calls from the inmate’s family, but usually nothing is done. Corrupt officers with bad reputations work for years.

The incident with Frank Valdes at Florida State Prison is a good case in point. The officers

Guard oversees convict laborers, 1941. Photos on pp. 12-14 are reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.
assigned to his wing were famous for unnecessary use of force. After a great number of complaints against the officers, the warden had cameras placed in the wing. But the camera system eventually malfunctioned, and when the new warden took over, he failed to address the camera issue even though he was advised of the abuse of force problem on the wing. Inmate Valdes was beaten to death by correctional officers on the wing. Criminal charges were eventually brought against them, but they were acquitted.

Inmates’ self-confidence and sense of connection to the outside world are also targets of Department policy. Hair styles are monitored and fads are prohibited. There was a time when inmates were allowed to receive packages from family, which provided them with their own clothes, shoes, and jewelry, items that could boost an incarcerated person’s self-esteem. The Department no longer allows inmates to receive packages. Once, inmates were allowed to call anyone who would accept their phone calls. Now, inmates can only call those people authorized by a phone list. The people submitted for the phone list are scrutinized before approval.

A review of the Department’s rule changes over the years reveals where its interests truly lie, and it’s not in the care or rehabilitation of inmates. New rules and policies have found ways to weaken the inmates physically, restrict their mobility, strip their ego and intimidate them into submission. To weaken them physically, the Depart-

**Prison Labor**

Prison labor began at the end of slavery when convicts were leased for work in the South, effectively returning large numbers of African Americans to plantations as free or cheap labor.

Today, many large corporations use prison labor. They include department stores, airlines, and catalog sales companies.

Many people see this as a reinstatement of an institution of forced labor. The analogies to slavery are obvious, given the disproportionate presence of people of color—especially young, African American men—in prisons. Prison labor can also be seen as an exploitation of the poor, who are vastly overrepresented in prison populations because they could not afford adequate representation.

Corporate use of cheap labor through the use of prisoners removes jobs from the general economy, fails to pay prisoners adequate compensation for work, and reduces the tax base in our communities.

*Source: <www.ucc.org>*

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*U.S. prisoners picking cotton.*
Prisons and Justice?

The Department has cut back on food portions and removed weight rooms. The Department has also restricted inmate mobility. Back in the 1990s, inmates could move more freely between their housing assignments and the recreation yard. They were given the freedom to form their own lines to chow. Under the new “controlled movement policy,” there is a designated time for every movement, and this is done under an officer’s supervision.

It’s all about control, and the corrections officers (COs) are taught that these “objects” of control cannot be trusted. I’ve heard these COs admit that they are brainwashed to believe inmates are lying, deceiving, and cunning people. An inmate’s explanation is always assumed to be wrong. Although officers are not supposed to use abusive or profane language toward any inmate or staff member, this type of language is the norm for correctional officers. Similar to slave owners, the Department of Corrections has a policy of using intimidation and scare tactics to control the activities and thinking of inmates.

The Department has found other ways to profit from inmates besides the free labor. High-ranking officials have purchased stock in the companies that supply the prisons with canteen. Using the fact that the prison’s canteen is the only store on the block for inmates, these companies have raised canteen prices drastically over the years. In the last 15 years, Florida prison canteen prices have risen drastically. Soups that used to cost 20 cents now costs 63 cents. Boots that were once free now cost $51.

The evolution of the Department of Corrections shows that it sees inmates more like slaves than anything else. The government pours money into security with no consideration for rehabilitation. The focus is on control and profit. Justice and care are not high on the government’s priority list. Although there is some justification for keeping some people from being physically dominant and free to roam, there is no excuse for the prison system’s neglect of justice and rehabilitation. Inmates are not slaves. They are civilians whom the government is responsible to help reform.

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