WORKING FOR 19 CENTS PER HOUR
STERLIN REAVES

When most free-world people think of the struggle for higher wages, almost none of them think of the prison population, and why would they? We are the forgotten class of semi-citizens of the United States.

But prison is where you’ll find the biggest discrepancy between jobs performed and pay. In most prisons across the U.S., inmates earn anywhere between 19 cents and 42 cents per hour – yes, I said cents – to be cooks, plumbers, electricians, painters, etc. These are jobs that people not in prison get paid $10-20 per hour to perform. My first prison job was as a kitchen janitor. I quickly got promoted to cook, but the promotion didn’t come with a pay raise. I was started at 19 cents per hour, and I got my first pay raise four months later to 20 cents. The work broke up the monotony of prison life, but my monthly earnings barely provided enough money for me to buy the most essential things, like stamps and soap.

Recently prisoners in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Ohio, Illinois, and California formed the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, the first widespread effort for union recognition among prisoners in decades. Prisoners in these states and many others coordinated and released a call for a national prison strike that happened on September 9, 2016.

Many prisoners fear that if they participate in actions like this, they will be punished in the form of misconducts and loss of privileges.

It’s my opinion that no radical change in policy or practice comes without struggle. Our families struggle enough to support themselves. The extra burden placed on them while trying to send us money causes stress and often is the reason relationships fracture. Speaking for myself, I just want to be paid equitably for the work I do. Americans are fighting to get paid a minimum wage that will allow them to afford the basic necessities required to live and function adequately. Prisoners are fighting for the same!

Sterlin Reaves is a repeat contributor to The Change Agent. He is incarcerated at SCI Greene in Waynesburg, PA, where he takes correspondence courses. He would love to communicate and share ideas with free-world people. You can reach him at: Sterlin Reaves, DX-5999, 175 Progress Dr., Waynesburg, PA 15370.

GATHERING INFORMATION

What is the problem posed by the author? And what is the strategy that some prisoners have tried to address the problem? What do you think about both the problem and the strategy?

**ASK** a friend to watch this video with you: “Ceasing to be Slaves: U.S. Prison Strike” at <http://tinyurl.com/prisoners-on-strike>.

**READ** the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States and try stating it in your own words. Is there a situation where slavery or involuntary servitude are acceptable in the U.S.?

“Nothert 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.”

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ATTICA UPRISING. Still from video
Conditions at the Attica Correctional Facility in Attica, NY, were unbearable. On September 9, 1971, about 1000 prisoners rioted, took control of the prison, and demanded better conditions.