The Prison Industry: Capitalist Punishment

by Julie Light, CorpWatch
October 28th, 1999

The assembly lines at CMT Blues look like those at any other US garment factory, except for one thing: the workers are watched over by armed guards. CMT Blues is housed at the maximum security Richard J. Donovan State Correctional Facility outside San Diego.

Seventy workers sew T-shirts for Mecca, Seattle Cotton Works, Lee Jeans and other US companies. The highly prized jobs pay minimum wage. Less than half goes into the inmate workers' pockets -- the rest is siphoned off to reimburse the state for the cost of their incarceration and to victims' restitution fund. The California Department of Corrections Joint Venture Program, and CMT Blues owner Pierre Slieman say they are providing inmates with job skills and work experience.

But two inmates and former CMT Blues employees say Sleiman and the Department of Corrections are operating a sweatshop behind bars. What's more, they say that prison officials retaliated against them when they blew the whistle on corruption at the plant. Inmates Charles Ervin and Shearwood Flemming spent 45 days in solitary confinement after talking to reporters about an alleged label switching scheme in which they claim they were forced to replace "made in Honduras" labels with "made in USA" tags. They are suing CMT Blues and the California Department of Corrections for labor and civil rights violations.

The CMT Blues scandal and the host of human rights and labor issues it raises, is just the tip of the iceberg in a web of interconnected business, government and class interests which critics dub the "prison industrial complex." Borrowing from the phrase "military industrial complex" coined by President Dwight Eisenhower during the Cold War, the term refers to the growing political and economic power that emanates from the increasingly intertwined relationship between private corporations and what were once exclusively public institutions. In short, incarceration has become big business. And it's booming.

The prison industry now employees more than half a million people -- more than any Fortune 500 corporation, other than General Motors. Mushrooming construction has turned the prison industry into the main employer in scores of economically depressed rural communities. And there are a host of firms profiting from private prisons, prison labor and services like healthcare and transportation.

Today, there are over 1.7 million people incarcerated in the United States, more than in any other industrialized country. They are disproportionately African American and Latino (almost 70% of US prisoners are people of color) and two thirds are serving sentences for non-violent crimes. One in three African American men between the ages of 20 and 29 is either in jail, on probation or parole. 1.4 million black men -- or 13% of African American men -- have lost the right to vote because they have committed felonies.

Taxpayers foot the bill for "get tough" policies that treat a generation of young people -- mostly young people of color -- as expendable. New York and California, states that once had arguably the finest public university systems in the country, now spend more money locking people up than on giving them a college education. Meanwhile, prison gates are swinging wide open for corporations. Some like CMT Blues, Microsoft, Boeing, TWA, and Victoria's Secret, are using low cost prison labor for every thing from manufacturing aircraft components and lingerie to booking reservations.

In addition to companies exploiting prison labor, there are eighteen or so private prison corporations that control about 100,000 prison beds across the country. The largest, the Nashville-based Corrections

Corporation of America -- whose securities were dubbed the theme stock of the nineties by one investment firm -- also operates private prisons in Puerto Rico, Australia, the UK and will soon open one in South Africa. These private lockups cut corners on labor costs, often hiring untrained, inexperienced guards, leading to a dismal record of escapes and brutality against inmates.

In a Texas prison operated by one company, guards were videotaped beating, shocking, kicking and setting dogs on prisoners. While private prisons hardly have a monopoly on such violence, critics argue that hiring low wage, untrained guards -- some of them with criminal records of their own -- makes brutality more likely.

The prison industry is not a new phenomenon, but rather has some grim historical antecedents. As death row journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal argues in a special column for CorpWatch, mixing the profit motive with punishment only invites abuse reminiscent of one of the ugliest chapters in US history. "Under a regime where more bodies equal more profits, prisons take one big step closer to their historical ancestor, the slave pen," writes Jamal.

In fact, prison labor has its roots in slavery. Following reconstruction, former Confederate Democrats instituted "convict leasing." Inmates, mostly freed slaves convicted of petty theft, were rented out to do everything from picking cotton to building railroads. In Mississippi, a huge prison farm resembling a slave plantation later replaced convict leasing. The infamous Parchman Farm was not closed until 1972, when inmates brought suit against the abusive conditions in federal court.

Today, criminal justice issues have become so urgent that organizing efforts by diverse communities around the country are beginning to pierce the deafening "tough on crime" drumbeat espoused by pundits and policy makers for the last 20 years. Community organizers, church groups, labor unions and progressive think tanks are coming together to fight prison privatization in the South. Organizations like Families against Mandatory Minimums are fighting discriminatory sentencing. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch put prison issues at the top of their US agenda. In Concord, California 2,000 Latino students have taken to the streets to demand "education not incarceration," as part of a protest against the backlash against immigrant communities.

Labor code and freedom of speech violations like those alleged in the suit against CMT Blues also resonate beyond prison walls. UNITE, the garment workers union, has joined inmates Ervin and Flemming in their suit against the clothing manufacturer and the California Department of Corrections. And the suit has caught the attention of first amendment advocates who would like to overturn California's ban on journalist interviews with state prisoners.

Punishment endured by prisoners like Ervin and Flemming has "an incredible chilling effect on prisoners because, combined with the media access ban, they know they can't communicate (with the press) with out suffering retaliation," explains Joseph Pertel, an attorney for the inmates. Pertel says it was actually a prison employee, not his clients, who called a local television station. Nevertheless, the two men, both convicted of second-degree murder, spoke out against working conditions at CMT Blues jeopardizing their eventual parole.

Because prisoners have so little voice on the outside, we highlight writings by prison journalists in this Issue, including an original column by Mumia Abu-Jamal and writings from *Prison Legal News*, edited by two Washington State inmates. Contributor Alex Friedmann, due to be paroled next month, was transferred out of a CCA private prison into a Tennessee state penitentiary, when his reporting behind bars angered company executives. We hope that by giving a voice to those inside prison walls we can contribute to a dialogue on redirecting criminal justice policy in this country.