

Mayday, Mayday – An Incarcerated Workers' Day

Chester Abbotsbury

DID YOU KNOW that the prisoner population in Canada holds jobs with little to none of the protections taken for granted by normal employees in this country? In prison there is no Old Age Security, no unemployment insurance, no job security, no inflation-indexed-pay-scaling, and no wage protection from cost-cutting bureaucrats who like to hit the disempowered and disenfranchised instead of their voting base.

Employment must be maintained as part of each incarcerate's Correctional Plan, meaning that if you don't work, you can't cascade down security levels within the system and you can't get Parole. This puts the institutional worker at a decided disadvantage as part of the natural law of labour supply and demand. We are, quite literally, a captive market.

In 1982 the Canadian Government, as part of a system to provide positive reinforcement of good behaviour in prison while at the same time fostering accountability, created a paid labour market within the prison system. The government offloaded some of its own costs onto the inmate population, making them pay for their mail, phone calls, hygiene items, over-the-counter medications, and sundry canteen items out of the new inmate pay system.

At the time, the minimum wage was applied to a standard prison workday, taxes and deductions were taken out, general deductions for “room and board” were accounted for, and the prison labourer received the remaining “disposable income.” This amounted to \$6.90 per day at the highest prison pay scale. On top of the items that inmates were then required to purchase themselves out of their pay, further deductions towards an Inmate Welfare Fund were taken. IWF's began to cover sports and gym equipment, holiday meals, sport and game tournament prizes, as well as paying for communal entertainment like film nights and later, cable packages. Inmates are expected to hand over a dollar a workday or more towards their common wellbeing.

Workers at CORCAN, the Crown Corporation empowered to utilise prison labour for industrial uses, received an additional incentive pay, based on the fact that they were either receiving training in a trade or actively employed in one. The skill of their labour, rightly so, gave them a larger payday. Their additional pay amounted to about \$1.20 per hour.

As part of the “Accountability Measures” implemented in October 2013, the ruling Conservatives did away with CORCAN incentive pay entirely. On top of that, they took another 30% off the top of the pay scales of prison labour, ostensibly for “food and accommodation” which had already been paid for in the original, 1982 calculation of the prison wage which had not since then changed.

Prison labour in Canada has never had a raise. The original maximum daily rate of \$6.90 that a prisoner could earn has not increased with either inflation or the cost of living since 1982. It is now 33 years later, and that paltry wage has been clawed back while costs of mail and telephone calls, as well as the sundry items we are expected to buy, have increased in price over time.

Instead of being sent here FOR punishment as indentured slaves, as labour practice within the Correctional Establishment seems to indicate, we must realize that one goes to prison AS punishment. If one is to separate those who fall outside of a society's boundaries from that society, then the learning and practice of societal norms, circumvented entirely when labour is compelled or forced, must be done in a microcosm of that society. The goal is to learn accountability and responsibility, not to comply to the decrees of an authoritarian state when labour is forced.

ConFederation, the Canadian Prisoners' Labour Union

An important piece of recent history

In 2011, prisoners at Mountain Institution in Agassiz, British Columbia attempted to form a union to address working conditions and pay structure for prison labour. Following similar attempts in the United States and the United Kingdom, they hired a lawyer, wrote a constitution, and collected letters of support from other unions. They named it ConFederation, and called themselves Local 001 with an eye to building a national organization. Petitions were circulated to six different prisons, which suggested that more than 75 percent of prisoners were interested. Unsurprisingly, staff at Mountain Institution began union-busting shortly thereafter.

In 2013, the case made its way to the Public Service Labour Relations Board, who refused to recognize the union on the technicality that prisoners were not considered 'employees' under the law. The federal prisoner strike later that year, which started in Ontario and quickly spread across the country against vast pay cuts, clearly demonstrated the ability of prisoners to fight a labour struggle without official recognition.

May 1st is International Workers Day

On May 1st, 1886, 40,000 workers in Chicago, and half a million across the United States, participated in a three-day general strike demanding an eight-hour work day. A week-long struggle resulted between protesters and police, and ultimately eight protesters were arrested, convicted without evidence, and executed. Their executions are widely regarded as some of the most overt political assassinations of radicals in North America, and May 1st has since been marked as International Workers Day in their honour. Since 2006, May Day has also been widely marked as a day to protest racist immigration policies in Canada and the U.S. and demand status for all. Strikes, pickets and protests take place around the world on May Day to honour and celebrate the struggles of workers, immigrants, and poor people all over. In 2015, events are planned in cities across Canada for May 1st, including:

Halifax, NS – March and rally focused on the fight for a \$15 minimum wage

Fredericton, NB – Art festival to highlight the struggles of working people

Quebec, QC – Anti-capitalist bloc in larger labour demonstration, organized by a feminist workers collective

Montreal, QC – Full-day “general strike,” neighbourhood protests and actions, and an anti-capitalist night demonstration

Gatineau, QC – Anti-capitalist contingent in labour march

Ottawa, ON – “Resist Austerity, Demand Change” rally and march to the prime minister's office

Kingston, ON – Free barbecue and anti-capitalist march downtown

Toronto, ON – Day of Action for immigrant and workers' rights, indigenous sovereignty, and demanding status for all

Hamilton, ON – Block party, free BBQ and march through the city with creative actions

Winnipeg, MB – An evening rally and march to mark International Worker's Day

Calgary, AB – Snake march and rally to "celebrate the end of classes"

Edmonton, AB – “Defend the rights of workers – defend the rights of all” anti-austerity march, followed by a party

Castlegar, BC – Celebratory BBQ lunch

Penticton, BC – Youth performing arts festival

Vancouver, BC – Night-time street party to celebrate grassroots resistance to gentrification, capitalism, and pipelines

Victoria, BC – Rally and protest against the abuse of temporary foreign workers

Collins Bay Institution: A Cluster Fuck

Jarrold G. Shook, Collins Bay Minimum Institution

They say the sun never sets on the Collins Bay Empire. At least not now that Collins Bay is a multi-level complex – a super prison, where Maximum, Medium and Minimum security prisoners are brought under the sovereignty and subject to the panoptic gaze of a centralized administration team.

Corrections officials, along with the conservative ideologues who envisioned this domain in the so called *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* have been referring to the new prison model as a 'clustered site,' a more efficient way of doing corrections. It's a cluster, alright: a cluster fuck.

In their 2009 report *A Flawed Compass*, UBC law professor Michael Jackson and ex-director of the John Howard Society Graham Stewart ask some pointed questions about the new correctional philosophy. Among them, “Can treatment, school or correctional staff – even administrators, easily move between prisoner groups of various security levels ... or will they tend to act as if though they were [all] higher security prisoners?”

This is a decisive question, because according to CSC policy, prisoners classified as maximum security require a high degree of supervision of control; medium security a moderate degree; and minimum security a low degree. Accordingly, CSC uses extensive bureaucratic methods to classify and place prisoners, and sets 'behavioural norms' at each institution. Certainly staff, for all kind of reasons, adopt a particular posture and temperament on the job that reflects the working environment. But what about when that context is constantly changing?

Think of it as if it were a game of hockey. Guards are all on the same team, but they play different positions. A forward (maximum) might be able to fall back and play defense (minimum) every now and again, or vice versa, but the coach doesn't switch the roster around every game and most certainly not every shift. This would confuse everyone and change the dynamic of the game. But this isn't a game; this is prison. And there are implications for everyone. Not only will this 'efficiency' create havoc, but it could turn Collins Bay Minimum (formerly Frontenac Institution) into a de facto medium security prison, without the reverse effect.

Convict culture is rigid. Prisoners enforce strict social rules against each other, sometimes on the threat of violence or social ostracism if not followed. Not everyone conforms, but it is overall pervasive. Typically, as prisoners cascade from higher to lower security levels, the shackles of conformity loosen somewhat. For this reason, minimum prisons are more free from the more contentious politics and related violence you see at higher security levels. Similar observations can be made about guard culture. At lower security levels, you don't see the adversarial *us vs them* mentality as much that so often places an additional and really, unnecessary strain on an already distressing and antagonistic environment. This is a good thing – for everyone. It protects the environment from becoming any more toxic than it already is. With rotating shifts of prison guards across security levels, the cultural milieu of higher security levels will likely creep its way into the minimum, the result being hardened conditions and a de facto increase in institutional security. It is only a matter of time.

Family Day Demo For Immigration Detainees

Reposted from the End Immigration Detention Network - www.endimmigrationdetention.com

Nearly a 150 of us descended on to the Central East Correctional Centre on Monday, Feb 16th. With the weather dropping below -30 celsius, plus windchill, we gathered with our breaths and hearts warm, calling for an end to immigration detentions and deportations.

Led by the high-school organizers from our Youth Committee, we marched right around the prison to where the immigration detainees are imprisoned. Seeing us, hundreds of prisoners banged on their glass windows, raised fists, and waved prison-made flags at us.

Melika Mojarab, 15, whose father Masoud Hajivand is imprisoned at Lindsay spoke of her family’s separation. Breia, 16, whose brother is in detention thanked those gathered, and Martin who was released after 36 months in immigration detention insisted that we cannot stop until the injustice of immigration detention is over.



Mark Your Calendars

August 10th is Prisoners Justice Day, a day set aside to remember all the people who have died unnatural deaths inside Canadian prisons. Inside, prisoners mark the day by refusing work and food, holding vigils, and wearing symbols of solidarity despite a crackdown by the Correctional Service on PJD activities. Outside, supporters and families hold vigils, protests and other public events.

Tune in Wednesdays to CFRC 101.9 fm from 7-8 pm for CFRC Prison Radio

Call 613-533-CFRC (2372) live during the show or mail your writing, messages and requests to: CPR c/o CFRC Radio, Lower Carruthers Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

About Over the Wall

Over the Wall is a twice-annual newsletter about strikes, actions and struggles going on inside or around Ontario prisons. It is published by End the Prison Industrial Complex (EPIC), a collective in Kingston who believe in and work towards a world without prisons.

If you have a story or article that you’d like to contribute, if you’d like to receive the newsletter, or just want to correspond, contact us at:

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