

# PRISON LABOUR: THE WHAT, WHEN, HOW AND WHY

Until very recently any mention of the words "prison labour" tended to conjure up the image of the classic chain-gang – predominantly black, save for some white A or B-list Hollywood star, all dressed in prison-issue uniforms and surrounded by an all-white armed guard force as they carried out some monotonous back-breaking job under a baking hot rural Southern States sun. That is until the advent of the cash-strapped Coalition government and its claims that prison labour ('real work' in Coalition-speak) would be at the heart of its so-called 'Rehabilitation Revolution'. So what exactly is prison labour? What is its current function and practice and why are the Coalition onto a loser?

## NOT WORKING ON A CHAIN-GANG

Yet even the chain-gang is somewhat anachronistic in today's America (though they are making a bit of a comeback where prisoners are filling the jobs vacuum caused by global financial crisis and Tea Party ideologue-inspired municipal cutbacks), where most prisoners are simply warehoused and left to fend for themselves; that is except for the select minority employed by the various state and federal prison industries boards today making much more than the traditional car license plates: in fact everything from office furniture and lingerie to army flak jackets and circuit boards for Patriot missiles. They even run service sector industries like call centres from their prisons.

China in contrast has turned the notion of industrial prisons into a massively profitable enterprise, one that is the envy of many liberal democracies unable to exploit their captive workforces in such a ruthless manner despite a shared and widespread public contempt for all prisoners. In the Laogai system, prisoners undergoing 'reform through labour' can end up in prison work camps doing everything from packing China tea or making the cheap D.I.Y. tools one finds in Pound Shops to manufacturing commercial vehicles or mining uranium ore. The Myanmar (Burmese) authorities go even further, forcing prisoners to act as "disposable human pack-mules" for the Army, carrying heavy loads into combat zones and performing 'human shield'-style mines-clearance.

In contrast, European prison labour is held to be much more humane system, supposedly providing both useful occupation (of otherwise empty time) and skills towards post-release employment. Except this is far from the reality.

## PRISON LABOUR UK STYLE

In the UK prison labour really only began as transportation was coming to an end, designed to keep the occupants of late C18th prison hulks occupied whilst being punished under a sentence of hard labour – reforming prisoners whilst teaching them to be industrious. When transportation officially ended in the mid C19th, it was replaced by penal servitude, often with hard labour, in a new and expanding prison system. Yet much of this was pointless, unproductive work, turning a Crank or working the Treadmill, done simply to keep prisoners occupied, keeping them tired and compliant so they did not cause their captors any trouble, and instilling upon them a regimented and often brutal discipline.

This was largely the default setting until hard labour was finally abolished in 1948. Admittedly, sewing mailbags had replaced the Crank and Treadmill, but prison labour was still essentially meant to be a mindless occupation that allowed time for the contemplation of one's 'sins'. One area of prison labour however had gradually developed alongside this mindless occupation to become the major prison employment: infrastructure jobs – cleaning and cooking for the prison population alongside workshops making virtually everything consumed within prisons: from socks and y-fronts to cell furniture and the very prison bars themselves; helping subsidise running costs and keeping the prison budget down. Everything except the locks and keys that is! Prisoners even used to make screw's uniforms until the Prison Service found that they could have cheaper and better quality ones made in Chinese prisons.

Nevertheless, the majority of prisons endured enforced inactivity, banged up in their cells for large parts of the day. Even after the reforms to the prison regime brought in the wake of the 1990 Strangeways rebellion and the introduction of the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS), little has changed. Except that IEPS has replaced the more obvious brutality inherent in the prison regime with a more pernicious culture of compliance and control, one built on earning 'privileges' above a bare minimum, one scarcely compliant with Human Rights legislation, by being willing to work in whatever job one is given. Thus contact with one's family via visits, phone calls and letters became a tool to ensure conformity despite it being officially recognised that the best hope for prisoner rehabilitation is the maintenance of familial contact.

## DEBT BONDAGE

Prison labour is not and has never been about rehabilitation, about learning useful skills, but is all about control. True, some skills are learnt and qualifications gained, but this is rare and most jobs are low-to-no-skill forced mind-numbing drudgery paying peanuts. And now the government, pleading poverty, is seeking to effectively force prisoners into a form of debt bondage – pimping them out to private companies as indentured labour, whilst at the same time bowing to the burgeoning power of the 'victim's lobby' and the need to be seen to be increasing the visibility of prisoners paying back their 'debt' to society, by imposing a new 'Victim's Tax' on prisoners' meagre earnings.

Now only a cynic would argue that 'real work' in prisons is really about creating a cheap captive labour force for the government's friends in big business at a time when the economic downturn is hitting their shareholders' dividends so hard. Yet, when one considers that on of their 'flagship partners' in prison training, Speedy Hire, has closed 37 depots with the loss of 300 jobs whilst at the same time employing 200 prisoners to service their plant hire tools, it is difficult to avoid such a conclusion. Except that most prison workshops are currently employed maintaining an already rundown and cash-strapped system and there just isn't any money left in the pot to build new workshops and the private sector is certainly not going to cough up the cash, however cheap the potential workforce. So it would appear that the long held desire to emulate the Laogai system will remain unsatisfied, for the time being.



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