

The American Workplace: Sweatshop USA

Workhouse Nation: Part Three

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“Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?” – Ebenezer Scrooge. “A Christmas Carol,” Charles Dickens

“Labor is prior to, and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is superior to capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.” – Abraham Lincoln

“I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a revolution of values. We must rapidly begin to shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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While Constitutional architect James Madison spoke of the rights of minorities in general, his writings make it clear that he had a particular minority in mind. Madison believed that government’s primary responsibility is “to protect the opulent against the majority.” To that end the constitutional system he instituted was designed to secure the rights of persons with property and to forestall the threat of democracy.

The yeoman farmers who’d fought and won the revolution had to be taught, by force if necessary, “that the ideals of the revolutionary pamphlets were not to be taken too seriously, that they would not be represented by people like themselves, but by ‘responsible men’ who could be trusted to defend privilege.” (1)

In his last letter on politics, Alexander Hamilton warned against dismembering the union, saying that it offered “no relief to our real disease, which is democracy...” (Because democracy disperses power.)

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, slave-owning, propertied plutocrats though they were, warned us against businesses, that is, corporations, used to accumulate and concentrate wealth, which is then translated into political power. They predicted a financial aristocracy via corporate tyranny. Having lived under the tyranny of the British East India Company, the first and most powerful transnational corporation in history, they knew from whence they spoke.

But since the states had placed legal limits on corporations before the Constitution was

written, the Bill of Rights did not, as Jefferson implored, contain an eleventh amendment forbidding monopolies, which would have kept these dangerous corporate mechanisms from becoming more powerful than the people, who are the sovereigns in a functioning democracy, whether direct or representative. Initially corporations were limited to projects undertaken in the public interest, but corporate shareholders used the Supreme Court as a scalpel to excise the protections and the immunities of the Fourteenth Amendment and transplant them into their property, the corporations. That operation allowed shareholders' property to begin assuming control of the United States government by exercising the constitutional rights of US citizens, and further, to assume the protections and immunities of the entire Bill of Rights under the mantle of "corporate personhood."

Repeat. Democracy disperses power. Corporations concentrate power. Corporations are property. Property as power, when concentrated in the hands of a few, inevitably becomes power over the majority. But it's no longer about freedom and democracy - if it ever was - since the US was created to protect the right of an "opulent minority" to property. And the "opulent minority" has always had the freedom to present the facade of democracy while doing exactly as it pleases.

By the Gilded Age, it had become in-your-face apparent that exploitation by this "opulent minority" created poverty - child labor, Astor's fetid tenements, Sinclair's expose' of the meat-packing industry in "The Jungle," Rockefeller's 90% monopoly of oil, and industrial "accidents" like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, et al. Such blatant, self-serving injustice was so morally repulsive that corporate shareholders would change their modus operandi - but only after threatened with another rebellion, deep in the depths of the Great Depression.

As a result of the New Deal, Americans, when elderly, would no longer be destitute. After paying into Social Security all of their working lives, they could at last stop working, and enjoy a modest retirement. Those still working could now come together to bargain collectively with the collectives known as corporations, for which they toiled and yielded up the greater part of the real wealth they created for society with their labor.

After a new set of "yeoman farmers" won World War II, they came home to go to college on the G.I. Bill and bought into the Ownership Society with veterans' loans for Levitt houses. The limited reforms of the New Deal, these veterans' programs, and the fact that the US was the only industrial democracy left standing after the war, helped to create the most prosperous period in America's history across the board, and the most prosperous middle class in the history of the world.

But the US juggernaut hit the wall in the 70s in the aftermath of two manipulated oil "crises," and as Japan and Europe recovered and began creating some serious economic competition. The remedy for waning corporate profit came in 1981 with "Volcker Shock." Paul Volcker, then head of the Federal Reserve, prescribed a ratcheting up of interest rates - to 21%. Severe repression kicked in. The wages of working people froze in place and then began to go backward as corporate profits resumed their climb.

In the 70s, one income could support a family. By the 80s and 90s it took two incomes. Now it often takes two incomes made up of two jobs each. But this is now the American way. At a town hall meeting, George W. Bush once asked a woman what she did for a living. When she replied that she had three jobs, he patted her on the head and said, "Isn't that great? That's an all-American story." And it's even truer today.

Today's slave wages don't cover the most basic human needs, leaving us exposed to the predators that have stalked humankind throughout history - disease, starvation and exposure to the elements. Even pre-Civil War slaves got room and board. Today's wage slaves pay for their own, returning the pitiful pittance they receive from the stingy, "invisible hand" of one corporation to the greedy "invisible hand" of another in the endless siphoning up of our hard-earned money to the top of the economic pyramid in order to provide the repulsive luxuries the "opulent minority" flaunts contemptuously in our faces just to prove to us that they can. And as far as a nation of the people, by the people and for the people - all the people - what we achieved via the Civil Rights Movement was the "freedom to starve without regard to race, creed, color or national origin." - Harold Cruse

At the bottom of all America's crises lies the mechanism by which the power that created the crises was itself created - corporations - finance corporations like banks, insurance corporations, pharmaceutical corporations, energy corporations, agricultural corporations, retail corporations, weapons corporations, telecommunications corporations, prison corporations, etc., etc., etc. They're all corporate mechanisms for maximizing profit, which is accumulated, concentrated and then translated into political power. And because there's a difference between politics and policy, the people may participate in the electoral theater of politics (talk), but they may not take part in the actual making of policy (action), which determines who gets what and how much.

And the "opulent minority" of shareholders and their corporations are not held to account for the results of their policy-making; for shamelessly exploiting the poor; for polluting the environment on a massive, industrial scale; for callously selling products that maim, injure and kill; for buying our representatives via "one dollar, one vote;" nor for colonizing defenseless countries backed by the obese power of the US military in order to extract their labor and resources for next to nothing.

And rather than confront corporations and shareholders, great groups of the impoverished population are scapegoated and reviled as the cause of corporations' effects. The poor, as they have been conditioned to do, blame themselves and suffer the shame of their poverty silently, or else allow themselves to be set one upon the other to create a buffer that insulates and protects the "opulent minority" from the immiserated majority. Witness the Tea Partiers.

The "opulent minority" rightly fear retaliation for having poisoned the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink; for trashing our economy, our schools and our infrastructure; for exporting our jobs, taking our homes and our savings and putting healthcare out of reach; for using human beings as interchangeable tools, that they throw out like garbage after they've used them up; and for turning our children into the ammunition that secures the interests of their transnational corporations - all to make one more buck on top the billions they've already got. And all the while they pretend to be protecting us from an enemy without, while using sophisticated Public Diplomacy developed for use against foreign populations; advertising created by PhDs in human psychology to press our fear and greed buttons; and corporate-owned information distributed by corporate-owned media to prevent us from recognizing that the "opulent minority" is the enemy within, our homegrown, economic terrorists, who continue to rape us as our "representatives" stand by, looking from the side, taking a payoff to let them do it.

This propaganda is so effective that after 30 years of voodoo economics, "free" market fundamentalism, and harsh, neoliberal SAPs, most of us still can't, or still refuse to, see who

the enemy really is. And what keeps the enemy up at night like ante-bellum South Carolina slave owners? Wondering when we'll snap. What will it take? No food or fuel? No jobs at all? Banks refusing to give us our money? Inflation making a loaf of bread worth a wheelbarrow full of cash? Granny burning alive as she "steals" electricity to keep warm after hers is shut off? Or all of the above "concurrent whirlpools of misery, sucking in the collective grievances of millions." This has always been the "opulent minority's" most terrifying nightmare. "There's a fuck load of them, and they have guns." - Frank Leone

Corporations, as well as individual members of the "opulent minority," are hiring private security, much like the railroad, coal and steel barons of the Gilded Age. Blackwater (Xe) and its ilk are present day incarnations of Pinkertons, Baldwin-Felts "detectives" and Henry Ford's own back-shooting "Service Department." From the post-Katrina streets of New Orleans, where American citizens were left to rot like garbage, to Baghdad, where these mercenaries protect State Department personnel, such contractors/assassins, though vastly more expensive than the army, are employed because they're so much more loyal - to money. And one day the "opulent minority" may no longer be able to trust that the US military rank and file will turn on their fellow Americans, their families and friends in defense of their masters' property.

On October 4, 2008, 4,700 regular Army troops were made available to the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM). The remainder of the 20,000 troop "allotment" will be added as they complete their assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan by 2011. The pretext is, as always, the danger of terrorism, but it's in preparation for military intervention in the event that the people's reaction to economic and societal meltdown crosses the line the "opulent minority" finds acceptable. (2)

The "Army Times" noted that "They may be called upon to help with civil unrest and crowd control...These troops are equipped with a new, modular package of nonlethal capabilities." The Army Times also reported, that the "3rd Infantry Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team [BCT] has spent 35 of the last 60 months in Iraq patrolling in full battle rattle, helping restore essential services and escorting supply convoys. Now they're training for the same mission-with a twist-at home." (3)

This deployment was made possible as a result of the 2007 Defense Authorization Act's Section 1076, empowering the president to impose martial law in the event of a threat to "public order," regardless of its causes, i.e., potentially produced by domestic political or social upheaval, not in response to 9/11 or the threat of terrorist attacks. (4)

With the Defense Authorization Act 2007, George W. Bush signed away a 200-year-old provision of the Insurrection Act, prohibiting the use of United States military forces for law enforcement purposes domestically unless Congress saw fit to authorize it in cases of national emergency. This would allow a president to declare such an emergency without consulting Congress and send our troops to put down whatever he decided was public disorder - anti-war protests, environmental activism, demonstrations for immigrants' rights, unions marching against globalization, students sitting in in protest of tuition hikes, or any group of citizens unwilling to tolerate policies detrimental to the general welfare and demanding restoration of their constitutional rights. (In California, students occupying campus buildings to protest budget cuts and tuition hikes were characterized by their "Governator" as engaging in "terrorism.") These laws were put in place to combat citizens' attempts to change the country's policy direction. They allowed pre-emptive crackdowns on potential threats to minority rule.

But both Democratic and Republican governors objected to Section 1076 as an unneeded expansion of presidential authority to federalize the National Guard and usurp the powers of state officials. And the president's power to declare martial law was limited by the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act. (5)

But after the H1N1 flu "pandemic" hysteria and the media feeding frenzy that created a terrorism panic over Flight 253's "Underwear Bomber," President Obama signed Executive Order 13528 on Jan. 11, 2010. It establishes a Council of Governors which the president can choose to "advise" him/agree with plans to seize control of the National Guard in the event of a "national emergency." Obama's Executive Order further weakens Posse Comitatus and allows federal seizure of control over armed forces historically under the democratic control of elected state officials. This effort to "synchronize and integrate" state National Guards with the Armed Forces would effectively place them under NORTHCOM's control. (6)

This is "a practical demonstration of the bipartisanship of ruling class consensus," and the reality is that support for repressive legislation like the PATRIOT Act has been a bipartisan affair from the start.

The Senate passed the USA PATRIOT Act in 2001 with only one dissenting vote. Members of Congress admitted they hadn't even read it. In 2010, the Democrats in Congress pushed through an unamended extension of the PATRIOT Act's most egregious provisions. The Obama Administration declined to support even minimal changes like barring government use of National Security Letters (NSLs)— FBI, CIA and Pentagon administrative subpoenas — for obtaining confidential records of US citizens not suspected of terrorism or espionage; letting the "lone-wolf" provision expire; requiring the government to explain, in writing, the factual basis for securing an NSL; allowing NSL recipients a limited ability to challenge gag orders barring them from informing the target of an investigation; and repealing the section of the FISA Amendments Act that granted blanket immunity to telecommunications companies that cooperated with the government in its illegal, warrantless wiretapping program. (7)

REX 84 was established during the Reagan Administration to keep order during a "mass exodus" of "illegals" flooding across the Mexico/US border, who'd then be rounded up and detained by Immigration prior to being deported. REX 84 also allows military bases to be closed and converted into prisons. It's existence was uncovered during the Iran-Contra hearings in 1987 and reported by the Miami Herald.

In early 2006, KBR, then a Halliburton subsidiary, was given a contract to build detention processing capabilities to expand Immigration's Detention and Removal Operations Program facilities in order to house people in the event of that emergency influx of immigrants, a natural disaster, or undefined "new programs that require additional detention space." (8)

World War Two Japanese internment camps and German and Italian POW camps were rehabilitated, and these facilities are operational. In the event of martial law it would only take two signatures - one on a Presidential Proclamation and the other on a warrant from the Attorney General with a list of names attached - to determine who will serve as forced labor in an attempt to reassert America's global industrial hegemony.

Nat Parry, writing about "Bush's Mysterious 'New Programs'" for Consortium News in February of 2006, noted an "item posted at the U.S. Army Web site, about the Pentagon's Civilian Inmate Labor Program. This program 'provides Army policy and guidance for

establishing civilian inmate labor programs and civilian prison camps on Army installations.’ The Army document, first drafted in 1997, underwent a ‘rapid action revision’ on Jan. 14, 2005. The revision provides a ‘template for developing agreements’ between the Army and corrections facilities for the use of civilian inmate labor on Army installations. On its face, the Army’s labor program refers to inmates housed in federal, state and local jails. The Army also cites various federal laws that govern the use of civilian labor and provide for the establishment of prison camps in the United States, including a federal statute that authorizes the Attorney General to ‘establish, equip, and maintain camps upon sites selected by him’ and ‘make available...the services of United States prisoners’ to various government departments, including the Department of Defense.” Parry also notes that the timing of the document’s posting, and its reference to a “rapid action revision,” coincided with KBR’s contract foreshadowing the “rapid development of new programs.”

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed both Executive Order 11000 and Executive Order 11051. EO 11000 allows the federal government to mobilize civilians into work brigades under government supervision (2/16/62). EO 11051 delegates authority to put all Executive Orders into effect in times of international tensions and economic or financial crisis to the Office of Emergency Planning (9/27/62).

An orderly enforcement of all these provisions will at first be made possible by troops returning from the Middle East equipped with a new, modular package of non-lethal “capabilities.” “Non-lethal” weapons (NLWs) have been used by police for a long time, and when used worldwide by military forces they’re meant to ensure compliance (from hostile “natives.”)

Americans, however, have already allowed themselves to be tear-gassed, maced, hit with water and sound cannons and tasered for exercising their right to free speech. They’ve meekly requested permits to exercise their right to freely associate. They’ve allowed themselves to be caged behind chain anchor fences and barbed wire as they “exercise” both these rights, unable to move from their designated “free speech zones.” And when they pass the permissible parameters of protest, police move in and taser, gas, and deafen them into submission.

Now taser’s distributor is planning a flying drone that fires stun darts at criminal suspects or rioters. The “Shockwave Area-Denial System” blankets an area with electrified darts and uses a wireless Taser projectile to pick off “ringleaders.” (9)

XM1063 is a “non-lethal personal suppression projectile” containing an “advanced riot control agent.” It’s an artillery shell that bursts in midair and scatters 152 parachuting canisters of its chemical payload – probably fentanyl – creating a “literal opiate of the masses.” The Pentagon’s only problem was developing an effective delivery vehicle and regulating dosages, but these problems were easily solved by partnering with the pharmaceuticals industry. (10) (Fentanyl is a narcotic 100 times more powerful than morphine, with an effect similar to heroin. However, it often acts as more of a sedative than a “high,” and it carries with it the risk of death from respiratory depression. (11)

A Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) is a non-lethal weapon capable of producing ear-shattering sounds that has been deployed in Iraq as an “anti-insurgent weapon.” At 150 decibels, it can cause major hearing damage. At almost a thousand yards away it’s painful, even with hands held over the ears – and ear plugs in. The Banshee II “sonic blaster” emits

a piercing 144-decibel shriek that also physically pumps the ear drums.” (12)

The Active Denial System (ADS), also called a pain ray, is a directed-energy weapon used primarily for crowd control. It works by firing a beam of high-frequency microwaves that excite the water and fat molecules in the body – just like a microwave oven heats food. It causes immediate and intense pain. The temperature keeps rising as long as the beam is applied, and it makes the skin feel as if it were on fire. A Reuters correspondent who volunteered to be shot with the ADS during a demonstration said it was “...too painful to bear without diving for cover.” (13)

Defense contractor Raytheon has developed a smaller version of the ADS, for which it was granted an FCC license in 2004 to demonstrate the technology to “law enforcement, military and security organizations.” Contrary to Raytheon’s claims, Michael Hanlon, another volunteer, said the finger he offered for a demonstration “was tingling hours later.” (14)

It’s uncomfortably easy to imagine peaceful, civilian protestors, e.g. “rioters,” being sonically blasted or brought to their knees with pain rays before street-clearing operations by SWAT teams. NLWs like gas and tasers are presently used to subdue people in civilian settings. A lower threshold of use may lead those armed with NLWs to use them as casually as they use tasers. (15) In addition, weapons with the primary purpose of inflicting pain make excellent torture devices. It’s for this reason that the Active Denial System was rejected for use in Iraq. The Pentagon feared it would be seen as an “instrument of torture.” (16)

Having such weapons at public events makes people think twice about exercising their constitutional rights. It uses fear and pain to enforce compliance, pre-empting the exercise of free speech and association. And that is precisely the point.

China’s Information Office of the State Council released “The Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009” on March 13, China’s version of the US State Department’s “Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2009” released on March 11. The Chinese used publicly available US government documents and US media sources to reveal America as the rest of the world sees it, not as it sees, or purports to see, itself. The report notes that police in the US killed 45 people with tasers from January to October of 2009, making the total 389 in the last ten years – or one American about every nine days. In New York City alone, there were 315 “internal supervisions” of police for unrestrained use of violence. (17)

There are already 2.3 million of us incarcerated, many for non-violent drug offenses. An additional population of protesters/“rioters” and up to 50 million insurance scofflaws would create a magnificently cheap labor platform on which to build the supply of US products the president proposes to export. “Incarceration may be the only US industry that enjoys unlimited growth potential...” “A new prison opens somewhere in the US every week.” – David Cole, Georgetown law professor

At present, those of us who can’t afford insurance can’t be forced to buy it, or sent to prison for refusing to buy it. We can’t be fined if we can’t afford annual premiums. At least not ’til 2014. But healthcare “reform” will force people to buy insurance with no options, public or otherwise. And if you do opt for the choice of food, mortgage payments, gas to get to your job, heat and electricity, your family or your life itself over using that money to further enrich insurance corporations, that will make you a criminal. And if you refuse to pay for this “insurance,” the only economy you’ll be contributing to is the prison economy. Perhaps

the individual penalty for not buying insurance company products could be thought of as the functional equivalent of the 20 shillings owed by over half the inmates in New York City's debtors' prison in 1787 and 1788.

Prison corporations will see shareholder profits rise. And those who own prison stocks and are incarcerated for non-payment will probably do well, but like occupants of "The Hotel California," they will never do well enough to leave. Imprisoned debtors could see their prison stocks rise while watching the money confiscated to pay their healthcare costs in prison.

Prison privatization actually began with the contracting of confinement and care of British prisoners after the American Revolution. Since the British could no longer ship their criminals and undesirables to the American colonies, they confined them on ships moored in British ports. The first for-profit prison in America opened in 1852 in California - San Quentin. But it was so badly mismanaged that it was turned over to the state government. (18)

After the Civil War, the South was able to continue its "peculiar institution" via the sharecropper system. The freed slave/sharecropper borrowed money from a land owner to work the same land he'd worked as a slave, and then shared the profits with the land owner, often his former master. But if the crop failed, the nouveau slave, white or black, still owed what he'd borrowed to the land owner, who shared only the profit, not the risk. In this way, while one man could no longer own another man, he could own another man's debt, the same way, today, another man owns his mortgage, his student loan, or his credit card debt.

A "hiring out" system of convict labor also served to perpetuate slavery. Prisons proved a cheaper, more efficient method of turning human beings into commodities. Freed slaves were accused of not making good on their sharecropping obligations, or of unproven, petty thievery. They were then incarcerated and "hired out" for cotton picking, mining and railroad building, and for work in brickyards, lumber camps and quarries. In 1868, plantation owners, businessmen and farmers were able to replace slave labor with convict leases, renting, rather than owning their workers.

From 1870 until 1910, 88% of hired out convicts in Georgia were Black, as were 93% of hired-out miners in Alabama. In Mississippi, the Parchman plantation, a huge prison farm, replaced hiring out. It lasted until 1972. (19)

In the industrial north, working conditions were medieval: child labor, sub-subsistence wages, dangerous conditions, interminable hours... Labor unions were a direct result of this abuse, and as soon as the Labor Movement began, there were protests against the use of for-profit convict labor as a means of breaking strikes and driving down wages across the board. (The way "illegal" immigrants are used today, again as a buffer for those who profit off them.) But the "opulent minority" and their corporations fought reform tooth and nail, and literally, with bullets, insisting that a decent standard of living for working people was an intrusion on their freedom (to exploit and control.) But by 1890, public opposition to convict labor for profit had forced state after state to forbid the sale of convict-made goods.

In the 30s, the Hayes-Cooper and Ashurst-Sumner Acts outlawed convict labor and made it a felony to move prison goods across state lines. But during the 70s, a new series of laws, starting with the Carter Administration's Justice System Improvement Act of 1979, allowed inmates to be put to work for profit again. Even Chief Justice Warren Burger wanted prisons

to become “factories with fences.” (20)

In the 80s, the prison population exploded due, in large part, to the “War on Drugs.” The cost of running prisons, as well as prison overcrowding, exploded along with the population. Private corporations seized this opportunity to go beyond contracting for convicts’ services and began contracting for complete management and operation of entire prisons. In 1984, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) became the first modern, for-profit prison to establish itself publicly. (21)

For-profit use of convict labor really boomed under Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and reached a peak in 1990 under Bill Clinton, with prison stocks selling like sub-prime mortgage-backed securities on Wall Street. State governments and corporate “entrepreneurs” teamed up to use prisoners to generate profit, and were soon joined on the bandwagon by politicians from both parties.

By the 90s more than 100 corporations were using thousands of convicts in at least 29 states. In 1994, the owner of DPAS, a San Francisco computer corporation, brought its data retrieval operation back from Mexico – to San Quentin prison. He said, “We have a captive labor force... And the whole thing is very profitable.” (22)

U.S. Technologies sold its Austin, Texas plant and fired all 150 of its employees. Forty-five days later it had replaced them with convict labor from a nearby private prison, where circuit boards were assembled for companies like IBM and Compaq. (23) Corporate underwriters of the construction of such “entrepreneurial enterprises” included American Express, General Electric, Smith Barney and Goldman Sachs. (24)

By 2000 California inmates were processing “more than 680,000 pounds of beef, 400,000 pounds of chicken products, 450,000 gallons of milk, 280,000 loaves of bread, and 2.9 million eggs (from 160,000 inmate-raised hens)” every month. A Starbucks subcontractor hired convicts to package holiday coffees and Nintendo Game Boys. Prisoners made “brooms and brushes, bedding and mattresses, toilets, sinks, and showers.” They shrink-wrapped products for a Microsoft subcontractor that also worked for Costco and JanSport. Convicts made “dorm furniture and lockers, diploma covers, binders, logbooks, library book carts, locker room benches, and juice boxes.” They worked in dental labs to produce a complete line of “prostheses: custom trays, try-ins, bite blocks, and dentures.” Convicts have also helped build a Wal-Mart distribution center, stocked merchandise for Toys ‘R’ Us and made lingerie and leisure wear for Victoria’s Secret and JCPenny. (25)

UNICOR, aka Federal Prison Industries, sells its products strictly to the US government. In 2008, its net sales were \$854.3 million, up from \$459 million in 1996. These products were made by 21,836 convicts, or 17% of the inmates available in federal prisons. And for their generation of these sales, the inmates received 4% of them as wages. (26)

UNICOR’s 109 federal prison factories pay for themselves, or rather, the convicts pay for them, since they receive no government funding while producing about 175 different products and services: clothing and textiles; electronics; vehicle parts; industrial products; office furniture; recycling; and data entry and encoding. (27) (See a job you’d like?) Unicolor said that its inmate call centers are the “best kept secret in outsourcing.” Unicolor convicts also made soldiers’ uniforms, bedding, shoes, helmets, and flak vests. Prisoners “produced missile cables and wiring harnesses for jets and tanks.” A Boeing subcontractor had inmates cutting airplane components for \$7 an hour, \$23 less than the same work paid on

the outside. (28)

And “Under current law, all physically fit inmates who are not a security risk or have a health exception are required to work, either for UNICOR or at some other prison job. Inmates earn from 23 cents to \$1.15 per hour, and all inmates with court ordered financial obligations must use at least 50% of this UNICOR income to satisfy these debts.” (29) (emphasis added)

Weapons manufacturing corporations see prisons as a profitable new market for “defense technology” like electronic bracelets and stun guns. Private transportation corporations make money moving prisoners. Healthcare corporations provide prisons with doctors and nurses. Food service corporations make prisoners’ meals. High-tech corporations hope to barcode prisoners or implant them with RFID chips and then sell scanners to monitor them. Telecommunications corporations like AT&T are looking for a piece of the enormously lucrative prison action. (30)

By 2008, 37 states had legalized “hiring out” convicts to private corporations that operate inside state prisons: “IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, AT&T, Wireless, Texas Instrument, Dell, Compaq, Honeywell, Hewlett-Packard, Nortel, Lucent Technologies, 3Com, Intel, Northern Telecom, TWA, Nordstrom’s, Revlon, Macy’s, Pierre Cardin, Target Stores, and many more.” And all these corporations experienced a powerful boost in shareholder profits as a result of using convicts, rather than “unincarcerated,” labor. (31)

And while crime rates have gone down, inmate population has gone up. From less than 300,000 inmates in 1972, the prison population rose to one million in 1990 and 2 million in 2000. In 1990 there were only five private prisons in the country, with a population of 2,000 inmates. In 2000 there were 100 private prisons with 62,000 inmates. (32) Today there are 264 for-profit prisons in America, housing almost 100,000 inmates. Most of these are in the southern and western parts of the country. They house both state and federal prisoners, and juveniles as well as adults. (33)

“No other society in human history has imprisoned so many of its own citizens.” (34) The United States has locked up a half million more people than China, which has a population five times greater. And while the United States has only 5% of the world’s population, it has 25% of the world’s convicts. (35) China’s “Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009” states that there are 7.3 million Americans under the authority of US correctional systems. (36)

The prison industrial complex is one of the fastest-growing sectors of US industry. “This multimillion-dollar industry has its own trade exhibitions, conventions, websites, and mail-order/Internet catalogs. It also has direct advertising campaigns, architecture companies, construction companies, investment houses on Wall Street, plumbing supply companies, food supply companies, armed security, and padded cells in a large variety of colors.” (37)

Privatizing prisons is an incentive to imprison people, because in order to guarantee enough profit to attract investors, these prisons have to be 90-95% filled. Corporate shareholders who make money off convict labor lobby for longer sentences and get-tough policies in order to enlarge and secure their workforce, as well as to continue the growth and profitability of their “enterprise.” (38)

Private prison corporations are major contributors to ALEC, the American Legislative

Exchange Council. Based in Washington, D.C., this public policy organization develops legislative models for tough-on-crime laws and advances “free” market principles like privatization. ALEC’s Criminal Justice Task Force developed and helped to implement “Truth in Sentencing” and “Three Strikes” laws. ALEC’s major contributors include private prison corporations like CCA and the GEO Group. (39)

From 1980 to 1994, profit off hired-out convict labor went from \$392 million to \$1.31 billion. And thanks to hiring out convicts, the United States once again became an attractive location for investment in work designed for a globalized, “Third” World labor force. Corporations and their congressional marionettes will argue that this is justified – America needs the jobs – even if Americans have to go to prison to get them. And the exports produced by this convict labor will not only increase the pool of available labor and strengthen US corporations against overseas competition, it will pay for itself – long the stuff of corporate nirvana – as it helps to rebuild US global economic hegemony.

“...slavery is but the owning of labor and carries with it the care of the laborers, while the European plan, led by England, is that capital shall control labor by controlling wages.” – from the Hazard Circular, 1862, purportedly from the banking interests of Britain to those of Civil War-era America (emphasis added)

In Bangladesh, a garment worker makes 22 cents an hour. The wage in Cambodia is 33 cents an hour; in Pakistan, 37 cents an hour; in Vietnam, 38 cents; in Sri Lanka, 43 cents; Indonesia, 44 cents; India, 55 cents; the Philippines, \$1.07; and Malaysia, \$1.18. (40) This is the globalized marketplace for labor in which we must compete. (Note that convicts at Federal Prison Industries make from 22 cents to \$1.18 an hour.)

The president’s State of the Union goal is doubling US exports in five years by pursuing a “more strategic and aggressive effort to open up new markets for our goods” and “send(ing) more products over seas” and “borrow(ing) less and produce(ing) more.”

The National Labor Committee’s (NLC) mission statement highlights the conditions we’re likely to experience in an American workhouse nation. “Transnational corporations (TNCs) now roam the world to find the cheapest and most vulnerable workers. Because TNCs are unaccountable, a dehumanized global workforce is ruthlessly exploited, denied their civil liberties, a living wage, and the right to work in dignity in healthy safe environments.” (41)

This is the very definition of a “sweatshop,” in which maximum profit is “sweated” out of each worker. This was a big part of the reason for the success of the Industrial Revolution.

Today “a sweatshop is a workplace that violates the law and workers are subject to: extreme exploitation, including the absence of a living wage or long hours; poor working conditions, such as health and safety hazards; arbitrary discipline, such as verbal or physical abuse; or fear and intimidation when they speak out, organize or attempt to form a union.” – Sweatshop Watch (42)

The US Department of Labor says a sweatshop is “a place of employment that violates two or more federal or state labor laws governing wages and overtime, child labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers’ compensation or industry regulation.”

(43)

NLC notes that Wal-Mart, “with over \$400 billion in sales and about 2.1 million employees...is the world’s largest retailer and private employer.” Under Wal-Mart’s “Open Availability” policy, all “associates” must be available 24/7. This puts its “associates” in a position in which they are forced to put Wal-Mart ahead of their families. (44)

At Wal-Mart, “associates” have to ask for a day off four weeks in advance. There are no emergencies. And since “associates” get demerits for any absences – no matter what the reason – this encourages them to go to work sick – even food-handlers. “Associates” are not told how many demerits they’ve racked up ‘til “D-Day” comes. On “Decision Day” “associates” have to “write an essay on why they like working at Wal-Mart, why they should keep their job, and how they’ll improve their future performance.” Based on this essay, they’re kept on or fired. If they keep their jobs, they’re put on a year’s probation and can be fired for the slightest infraction. (45)

Half of Wal-Mart’s “associates” get no health insurance, and those who do pay much of the cost and get very little for it. (46) When “associates” opt out, or decline these magnanimous “benefits,” Wal-Mart saves the money it doesn’t have to pay in wages. Half of Wal-Mart’s American “associates” make so little money they need Food Stamps in order to feed their families. That makes taxpayers liable for the portion of their “associates’” wages that Wal-Mart refuses to pay.

Overall, Wal-Mart’s “associates” are “overworked, underpaid, (many below the federal poverty line), denied benefits, discriminated against, punished for the slightest infraction, and treated like” property. (47)

And this is what’s going on in America now.

Let’s look into our future at work under globalized wages and working conditions. Let’s take a look at China. Jason Chen reported that “Microsoft, IBM, Dell, Lenovo, and HP keyboards were likely were made under horrific working conditions at a Meitai Dongguan City, China factory” where workers are forbidden to talk, raise their heads, or put their hands in their pockets. They lose 3 day’s pay for leaving their work stations without permission. They’re fined if they’re a minute late. They get searched when they come to and leave work. And if they hand out flyers or discuss working conditions with outsiders, they’re fired. (48)

The assembly line never stops. Workers who need to go to the bathroom have to wait for a scheduled break. Taking Sunday off costs them two and a half days’ pay. They average up to 81 hours a week, including 34 hours of overtime, 318% over China’s legal limit. Their base pay is 64 cents an hour, and after deductions for room and board (and in our case, that would include health insurance), their take-home pay amounts to 41 cents an hour. And they’re often cheated out of as much as 19% of it. (49)

They lose two hours pay for “not lining up correctly while punching time cards or at the cafeteria”, for not working “diligently,” and for putting personal possessions on their work desks. They also face a loss of two hours pay for “not parking bicycles according to company regulations, riding them at the facility not according to company rules, and returning to dorms after curfew.” (50)

They lose seven hours pay for switching dorm beds without permission, and one and a half

day's pay for getting to work over an hour late, "riding the elevator without permission, using dorm electricity without permission, using company phones for personal calls, producing low quality products, socializing with other employees during working hours, entering or leaving the factory without being inspected, or treating supervisors 'with an arrogant attitude.'" (51)

But perhaps that's the pot calling the kettle black. China's "Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009" found documentation on 5,057 workplace deaths in the US in 2007, the last year for which figures are available. That's 17 of us - every day! And "Not one employer was criminally charged for any of these deaths." The report also found child hunger combined with "rampant child labor in agriculture: some 400,000 child farm workers pick America's crops. The US also leads the world in imprisoning children and juveniles..." (52) (emphasis added)

Now let's look further into our future as a globalized work force. Let's look at the Kabir Steel Yard in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

In September 2009, NLC reported that Kabir Steel Yard was "Where Ships and Workers Go To Die." NLC Executive Director Charles Kernaghan subtitled the report "If There Is a Hell on Earth, This Is It," calling the Kabir site "one of the strangest, most striking and frightening (ones) in the world." (53)

"About 30,000 workers dismantle decommissioned," 25 million-pound "tanker ships - 20 stories high, up to 1,000 feet long and from 95 to 164 feet wide - 12 hours a day, seven days a week for 22-32 cents an hour while 'handling and breathing in dangerous toxic waste with no safeguards whatsoever and under conditions that violate every local and international labor law.' Workers use hammers to break up 15,000 pounds of asbestos in each ship, then dump it on the sand to wash away." (54)

Last September, one "worker was burned to death while breaking apart a South Korean tanker," and another was left in critical condition. "Three more were seriously burned when their blowtorches struck a gas tank that exploded..." Workers are "often paralyzed or crushed to death by falling metal plates." (55)

On average, each ship, in addition to "15,000 pounds of asbestos, contains 10 to 100 tons of lead paint. As a result, workers are exposed to toxins from asbestos, lead, PCBs, mercury, arsenic, dioxins, cadmium, solvents, black oil residues and carcinogenic fumes from melting metal and lead paint." (56)

"Helpers, often children, go barefoot or wear flip flops, use hammers to break apart asbestos, then shovel it into bags to dump in the sand." There's no basic protective gear. "Cutters using blowtorches wear sunglasses, not protective goggles; baseball caps, not hardhats; dirty bandanas around their noses and mouths, not respiratory masks; and two sets of shirts, not welders' vests..." "They often work on 'floating stairs,' bamboo rope ladders. They hang on with one hand and operate a blowtorch with the other and use their teeth to turn liquid gas and oxygen valves on and off." (57)

Note that "a UNICOR operation in California that 'de-manufactures' computer cathode-type monitors neglected the industry standard practice of using a crushing machine to minimize the danger of flying glass. This uses an isolated air system that also avoids releasing lead, barium, and phosphor compounds into the air workers breathe. At this UNICOR operation,

convicts smashed CRTs with hammers.” (58)

In February of this year, at least 21 workers were killed and about 30 others injured in a fire inside the Garib and Garib Sweater Factory at Gazipur, Bangladesh. An electrical short-circuit probably caused the fire, but, as in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, locked exits were the main reason for the deaths. The fire broke out on the first floor about 9:30 pm and spread quickly to other floors, trapping workers. It took two hours for fire fighters and 11 fire engines to bring it under control. Most of the deaths appeared to have been from smoke inhalation. (59)

Abdur Rashid, the officer-in-charge of Joydevpur police station, said “Most of the workers died from suffocation in the blaze as they were locked into the factory room on completion of their night duty.” Fire officials said fire prevention equipment at the factory was “virtually useless” and the building was poorly ventilated. In addition to illegal structures in the factory, lack of emergency lighting made it impossible for workers to escape. And the workers did not know how to operate the fire extinguishers. (60) (emphasis added)

Garib and Garib, which produced sweaters for Swedish fashion chain H&M, as well as clothing for Wal-Mart and JC Penny, is just one of 4,000 textile producers in Bangladesh. And this fire wasn’t the first. Factory fires and collapses are commonplace in Bangladesh. Since 1990, at least 240 people have died in garment factory fires. One fire killed 54 workers and injured over a 100, but there’s still widespread violation of safety regulations and a lack of properly maintained fire equipment, fire exits, emergency lighting and fire drills. (61)

This is the predictable result of the drive for profit, since Bangladesh depends so heavily on its garment industry, which brings in about \$10 billion in exports every year and employs about two million workers, mostly women. Bangladesh is now the world’s second largest apparel producer. (62)

When the Multi-Fiber Agreement, which had allocated quotas to individual countries, ended in January 2005, Bangladesh faced competition from China and India. As a result the government has been preoccupied with keeping garment industry profits high by keeping costs low — meaning wages and working conditions. (63)

“NLC calls the world ‘a desperate place for the poor.’” Global trade rules won’t protect them. They have to keep jobs they know will harm or kill them. They have no choice. They have to support their families. Globalization is not the engine of prosperity and wealth for people everywhere – just for the “opulent minority.” Globalization is a major cause of inequality and unemployment. It’s actually a worldwide version of capitalism’s basic mechanism, the exploitation of labor via the appropriation of “surplus” value, with globalization prompting a race to the bottom for profits. And this is the abyss into which we’re headed.

But “...any human institution that requires the dehumanization of human beings to function...is by its very nature immoral, even if it is not illegal. To intentionally treat another human being as a thing, as something less than human; to degrade ourselves as human beings by surrendering our conscience, our reason, our dignity, or our self worth for some temporary advantage; are crimes against the inherent value of all members of mankind.” (64) And crimes against life itself.

However, today “Greed, for want of a better word, is good.”

The Lust After Money has finally been freed from the chains of religion, morality, ethics, empathy and all sense of shame. Ancient ingrained inhibitions, warnings, and taboos against greed and acquisition have been erased, and sociopathic, genocidal self-interest elevated to a sacrament.

The fire of unbridled and insatiable gluttony on the part of the “opulent minority” for money and power is fueled by the accelerant of the ease of accumulation of unearned gain via the corporate mechanism of unaccountable appropriation of the real wealth of society – which is produced only by the majority of their laboring brothers, who are sacrificed, and who sacrifice themselves, to the corporation, an inhuman idol-mechanism for accumulating wealth, that is translated into political power to accumulate even more wealth. In its single-minded transformation of living resources into dead profit, it uses us as its means.

To accelerate this transformation, the “opulent minority” had exported the very means they engineered to keep us alive to serve them – our jobs – because they thought they didn’t need us any longer, that they could cut out the middle man – labor – between them and money. But in the depths of the engineered economic “crisis,” which they instigated to transfer even more of the wealth the people create to themselves, the “opulent minority” has discovered that they do have use for us after all.

And in order to re-establish the global imperial reach the “opulent minority” once comfortably enjoyed, the US method of self-enrichment via the mechanism of corporate economic colonization is now cannibalizing its own, and so Cain is once again killing Abel – and all for a few dollars more on top a pile that reaches to the heavens and stinks in the nostrils of whatever gods there may be. The Earth itself is preparing to cleanse the celestial airs of this stench, and on the petard of our own creation – climate decimation – hoist us into history.

American is once more the designated economic colony du jour. When King George III and the British East India Company instituted such economic oppression there was a revolution. Will we distinguish ourselves and honor that memory, file obediently into the KBR workhouses, or follow the mis-directed, free-floating anger of the Tea Partiers into fascism?

“The illusion of freedom will continue for as long as it’s profitable to continue the illusion. At the point where the illusion becomes too expensive to maintain, they will just take down the scenery, pull back the curtains, and you will see the brick wall at the back of the theater.” – Frank Zappa

“The two greatest obstacles to democracy in the United States are, first the widespread delusion among the poor that we have a democracy, and second, the chronic terror among the rich, lest we get it.” – Edward Dowling

“All experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.” – The Declaration of Independence

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