

“The Insourcing of Prison Labor”: Seven US Corporate Household Names Use Prison Labor to Produce their Goods

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You won't believe who's on this list.

Once slavery was abolished in 1865, manufacturers scrambled to find other sources of cheap labor—and because the 13th amendment banned slavery (except as punishment for crimes), they didn't have to look too far. Prisons and big businesses have now been exploiting this loophole in the 13th amendment for over a century.

“Insourcing,” as prison labor is often called, is an even cheaper alternative to outsourcing. Instead of sending labor over to China or Bangladesh, manufacturers have chosen to forcibly employ the [2.4 million incarcerated people in the United States](#). Chances are high that if a product you're holding says it is “American Made,” it was made in an American prison.

On average, prisoners work 8 hours a day, but they have no union representation and make [between .23 and \\$1.15 per hour](#), over 6 times less than federal minimum wage. These low wages combined with increasing communication and commissary costs mean that inmates are often released from correctional facilities with more debt than they had on their arrival. Meanwhile, big businesses receive tax credits for employing these inmates in excess of millions of dollars a year.

While almost every business in America uses some form of prison labor to produce their goods, here are just a few of the companies who are helping prisoners pay off their debt to society, so to speak.

1. Whole Foods. The costly organic supermarket often nicknamed “Whole Paycheck” purchases artisan cheese and fish prepared by inmates who work for private companies. The inmates are [paid .74 cents a day](#) to raise tilapia that is subsequently sold for \$11.99 a pound at the fashionable grocery store.
2. McDonald's. The world's most successful fast food franchise purchases a plethora of goods manufactured in prisons, including plastic cutlery, containers, and uniforms. [The inmates who sew McDonald's uniforms](#) make even less money by the hour than the people who wear them.
3. Wal-Mart. Although their company policy clearly states that “forced or prison labor will not be tolerated by Wal-Mart”, there are items in their store supplied by third-party prison labor factories. Wal-Mart [purchases its produce from prison farms](#) where laborers are often subjected to long, arduous hours in the blazing heat without adequate sunscreen, water, or food.
4. Victoria's Secret. Female inmates in South Carolina sew undergarments and

casual-wear for the pricey lingerie company. In the late 1990's, 2 prisoners [were placed in solitary confinement](#) for telling journalists that they were hired to replace "Made in Honduras" garment tags with "Made in U.S.A." tags. Victoria's Secret has declined to comment.

5. Aramark. This company, which also provides food to colleges, public schools and hospitals, has a monopoly on foodservice in about 600 prisons in the U.S. Despite this, Aramark has a history of poor foodservice, including a massive food shortage that [caused a prison riot](#) in Kentucky in 2009.
6. AT&T. In 1993, the massive phone company laid off thousands of telephone operators—all union members—in order to increase their profits. Even though AT&T's company policy regarding prison labor reads eerily like Wal-Mart's, they have consistently used inmates to work in their call centers since '93, [barely paying them \\$2 a day](#).
7. BP. When BP spilled 4.2 million barrels of oil into the Gulf coast, [the company sent a workforce of almost exclusively African-American inmates](#) to clean up the toxic spill while community members, many of whom were out-of-work fisherman, struggled to make ends meet. BP's decision to use prisoners instead of hiring displaced workers outraged the Gulf community, but the oil company did nothing to reconcile the situation.

From dentures to shower curtains to pill bottles, almost everything you can imagine is being made in American prisons. Also implicit in the past and present use of prison labor are [Microsoft, Nike, Nintendo, Honda, Pfizer, Saks Fifth Avenue, JCPenney, Macy's, Starbucks, and more](#). For an even more detailed list of businesses that use prison labor, visit [buycott.com](#), but the real guilty party here is the United States government. [UNICOR, the corporation created and owned by the federal government to oversee penal labor](#), sets the condition and wage standards for working inmates.

One of the highest-paying prison jobs in the country? [Sewing American flags](#) for the state police.

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