

Opinion: Working prisoners are entitled to employment and safety standards just like anybody else

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The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) recently [ended its longstanding relationship](#) with the meatpacking company, Wallace Beef.

This means that federal prisoners incarcerated in the Joyceville Institution near Kingston will no longer provide slaughterhouse [labor](#) for the private firm.

The announcement comes after years of campaigning by animal rights and prison farm activists. Groups like [Evolve Our Prison Farms have long criticized the Joyceville abattoir operation](#) as cruel to animals and exploitative of prisoners. They also [raised a number of concerns](#) about the operation's lax oversight and poor environmental practices.

CSC has yet to announce if it will seek a new contractor, but regardless of what happens to the abattoir at Joyceville, it is long past the time for Canada to reconsider its approach to prison labor.

As Halifax lawyer Asaf Rashid and I argue in our new book, [Solidarity Beyond Bars: Unionizing Prison Labor](#), there is no good legal or moral argument for denying prisoners their rights as workers.

Work as rehabilitation

According to the law and to correctional policy, prisoners in Canada work as part of their rehabilitation, not as punishment. This labor takes two main forms.

The first is institutional maintenance—prisoners perform much of the cooking, cleaning, clerical and other work necessary for the day-to-day functioning of the prisons in which they are incarcerated. Some also work in prison industries, designed to give prisoners "work-like" experience.

Federal prison industries are operated by [CORCAN](#), a special operating agency of the Correctional Service of Canada. Among other activities, [prisoners working for CORCAN produce office furniture and textiles](#).

[run construction, printing and laundry services](#) and work on Canada's [few remaining prison farms](#).

The problems with prison labor in this country are well known by the government. The Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), Canada's federal prison watchdog, [routinely admonishes](#) CSC's employment programming. In the most recent report, Correctional Investigator Ivan Zinger [highlighted employment and pay discrimination against Black prisoners](#) in particular.

The year before, Zinger honed in on CORCAN's inadequate programming for women, [noting that](#) "jobs for women are often grounded in gendered roles and expectations, offering few marketable skills."

The OCI's 2019-2020 report [starkly states](#):

"Few CORCAN-run industries provide training or teach skills that are job-relevant or meet labor market demands. The service has continued to maintain obsolete infrastructure and technological platforms for such an extended period of time that these problems now appear insoluble."

Wage clawbacks

Pay is another significant issue. In 2013, Stephen Harper's Conservative government implemented new room and board and other fees that amounted to a 30 percent [wage clawback](#) and eliminated incentive pay for CORCAN work.

In announcing the new fees, the government ignored the fact that pay scales for federal prisoners, implemented in 1981, already accounted for room and board deductions. The maximum pay for federal prisoners is \$6.90 per day, minus mandatory fees.

According to the OCI, since these changes, the [average pay for prisoners working full time is around 30 cents an hour](#). Meanwhile, the cost of living in prison has skyrocketed as more and more expenses—including the cost of basic hygiene items—have been downloaded onto prisoners.

Money is also required for the letters and phone calls prisoners need to maintain community relationships, which are viewed favorably when parole boards make decisions. What's more, scholars—and prisoners themselves—have warned that [low pay hinders prisoners' ability to successfully reintegrate post-release](#) (like avoiding committing crimes out of financial necessity), which ultimately reduces [public safety](#).

Prison labor, like other work, [can also be dangerous and unhealthy](#).

No labor rights

However, just as they are excluded from employment standards and labor laws, prisoners are generally excluded from health and safety laws designed to protect workers.

There is no public safety justification, let alone a moral one, for the exclusion of working prisoners from normal employment and health and safety protections. There's no reason at all to curtail prisoners' labor rights.

A union for prisoners may seem far-fetched, but there is historical precedent. In 1977, [provincial prisoners working in a privately managed abattoir at Ontario's Guelph Correctional Centre unionized](#), winning full rights as workers. The union lasted nearly two decades before the operation was moved off the prison grounds as part of a corporate merger.

As the OCI and other critics have made clear, federal [prison](#) labor

schemes are failing prisoners and the public. In looking to the future, CSC should seriously consider this success from the past. All workers deserve full rights and protections.

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