



Inmates of the Oregon State Penitentiary sort laundry. The laundry service is one of 28 businesses operated by Oregon Corrections Enterprises inside Oregon's state prisons. PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Inside Oregon's prison workforce

Do inmates learn valuable skills through work and education programs in Oregon prisons? Or are they being exploited while paid slave wages?

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On Sept. 9, hundreds flooded downtown Portland in protest of profits made off the backs of America's inmates, who are typically paid less than a dollar an hour to work menial jobs. The demonstration was in solidarity with a national prison-worker strike calling for an end to "prison slavery."

They call it slavery because, in essence, it is. The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery, but with one exception: as a punishment for a crime.

In 1994, Oregon voters doubled-down on prison labor when they passed Ballot

Measure 17, the Prison Reform and Inmate Work Act.

The idea was that prisoners should work just as hard as the taxpayers who fund their incarceration, and they should spend their time in prison taking part in productive activities that will help them re-enter society with practical skills and work ethic.

In the years since, all physically able inmates have been required to engage in a full-time job or work-training program. While education and treatment programs can count toward an inmate's 40-hour-per-week obligation, at least 20 hours per week must be work-related.

A banner on the Facebook event page for the Portland protest reads, "From Alabama to Oregon, Prisoners are Striking Nationwide September 9."

In Portland, more than a dozen advocacy groups co-sponsored the march through downtown, targeting companies known to use prison labor, such as McDonald's and Whole Foods.

And still the question remains: Are prisoners in Oregon exploited for corporate gains while making slave wages working menial jobs, or are they gaining skills that will help them succeed after their release?

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