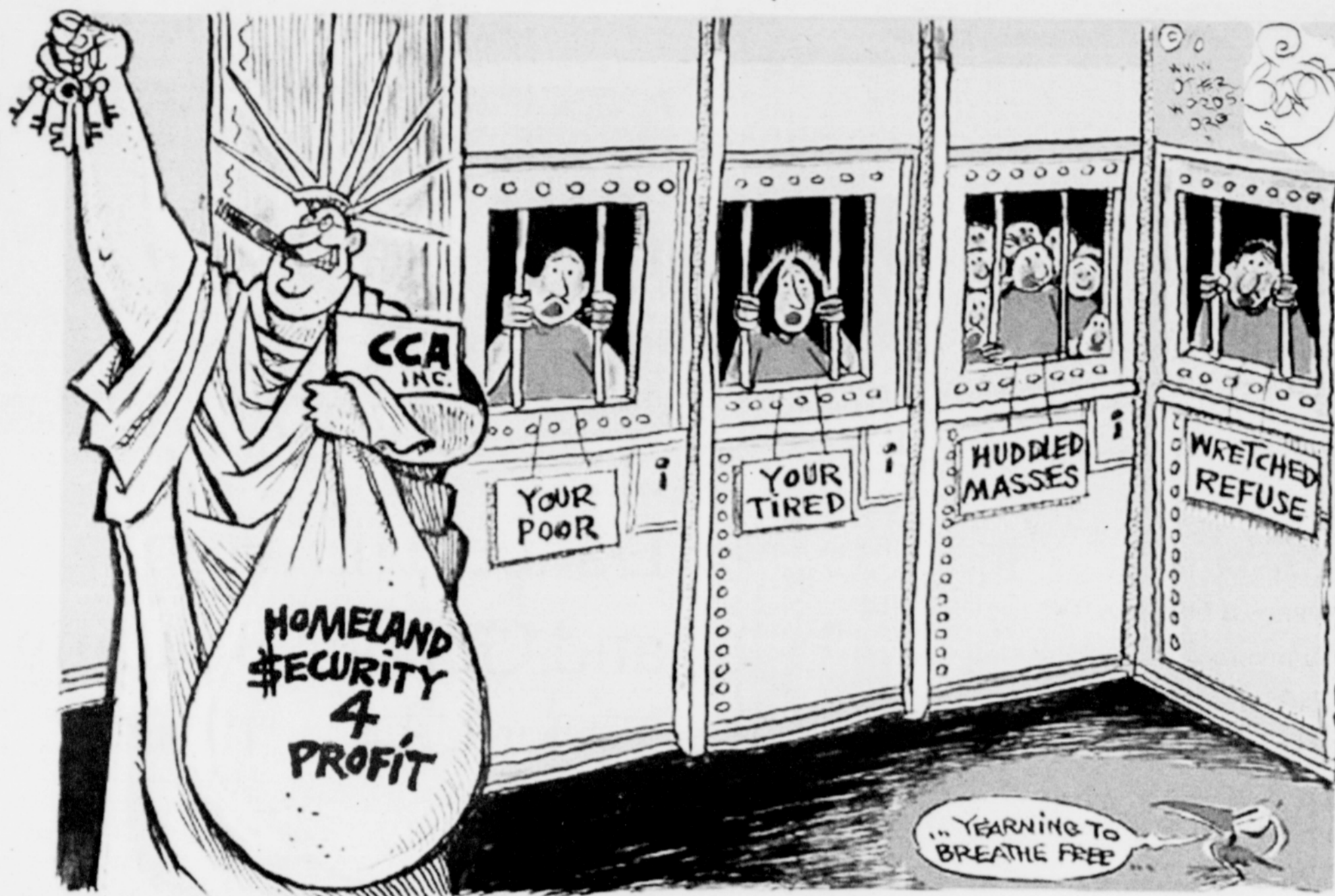


OPINION



The Con to Criminalize Immigrants

Corrections Corp. of America puts profits over human rights

BY CATALINA NIETO

The only time four-year-old Logan got to play hide-and-seek with his dad this year was through a Plexiglass window at the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Ga., nine hours from his hometown.



A person might be detained in a for-profit center like Stewart for any number of reasons, many of them bureaucratic. Some detainees were seeking refuge in the United States as victims of U.S.-sponsored military training and atrocities in Latin America. Other detainees are farmers, whose only economically viable option was to find work in the United States in order to provide for their families. Trade policies beneficial to American agribusiness are often at the root of this type of migration.

In Logan's dad's case, the issue was bureaucratic: his elderly mother became confused during a residency interview and the official paper-

work was sent to an out-of-date address. Although Pedro Guzman Perez came to the U.S. as an eight-year-old child, is married to a U.S. citizen, and has an American-born son, he has been held in detention for the past 15 months as his case is processed.

In the meantime, life in a detention center can be harsher than federal lock-up. The Stewart Detention Center is run by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). The company prioritizes its profit margin over maintaining minimum standards for health care. As a result, thousands of detainees across the country are left suffering in prison cells without access to sufficient medical attention. In March 2009, Stewart detainee Roberto Martinez Medina died of simple infection that went untreated at the detention center. Pedro's fellow prisoners have resorted to hunger strikes to call for better conditions.

"You show me a for-profit prison and I'll show you a human rights violation," said one former Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner at a 2009 panel on immigration detention.

CCA's executive team wasn't always swimming in money. In 1999, independent auditors doubted CCA could even stay in business after the corporation suffered a net loss of \$72 million, primarily due to beds left empty in its detention centers.

Then CCA began to lobby for harsher immigration policies. From January 2008 to April 2010, CCA spent \$4.4 million lobbying Immigration and Customs

Enforcement, the Department of Homeland Security, both houses of Congress, and other government bodies. Five of CCA's most lucrative contracts with ICE have no end date. And as a result, less funding is going to immigration policies that meet basic human rights standards.

Meanwhile, CCA executives, who refer to detained immigrants as "product," are set to reap huge profits.

In addition to directing funding towards enforcement-only policies that criminalize immigrants, CCA lobbies for immigration policies that get more undocumented residents locked up and thus fill empty beds. In fact, NPR uncovered the company's role not only in lobbying for the anti-immigrant law in Arizona, but also in drafting it. CCA already has six detention centers in Arizona. For CCA, immigration crackdown laws like Arizona's mean big bucks.

"We've never seen the wind at our back like it is today," CCA's president and CEO John D. Ferguson said after discussing \$1.3 billion in revenue during a conference call with investors. The federal government is spending \$60.50 per inmate per day at the detention center.

And that's too bad for kids like Logan, who didn't get to spend Christmas with his dad again in December.

"Emotionally, it's really hard and mentally draining. I don't see my wife very often," Pedro told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution following a vigil at the Stewart Detention Center. "For my son, I want to be there. I want to play with him...I cannot smell him and feel his skin and give him a hug. I wish I could have that time."

Every additional day Logan's dad languishes in at the Stewart Detention Center, a family is further torn apart and CCA's profit margin grows.

Catalina Nieto is the National Grassroots Organizer with Witness for Peace.



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