

## Prisons 'R Us

In times gone by, remember the cracks we used to make about someone going to prison to make license plates?

It was a throw away line good for a chuckle. Then we forgot about it and went on with our lives.

But what about the prisoners making license plates?

Did that really happen?

Does it still go on?

Oh baby, you better believe it does.

How many of us realize that prison labor has become the backbone of a very profitable industry for the government?

Now you might say that if these people broke the law, then their butts are not their own and whatever happens to them inside the joint is, well, just the way it goes.

Have you ever stopped to consider how many inmates are incarcerated for non-violent crimes and are, in fact, in prison for being nothing more than a pothead?

Despite your feelings about marijuana, it is hard to believe that the use and growth of the cannabis plant was nearly legalized all across the United States in the seventies, then somehow during the years that followed was turned into a crime punishable by huge prison sentences.

And when it is said that marijuana is the starter drug, it should be made clear that it's not marijuana but alcohol that is the starter drug and the substance responsible for killing thousands of people a year in automobile accidents alone.

Nevertheless, our prisons are full of non-violent offenders, many of whom did nothing more than get caught growing a couple of pot plants in the woods behind their homes.

These non-violent offenders, however, comprise a great prison workforce. They are usually intelligent, free of emotional problems or pathological behavior.

Just the kind of workers you'd like to have make, say, your furniture, appliances, sound systems or computer equipment.

In fact, Dell utilized prison labor in the manufacturing of its computers until the public found out and began to criticize the company for doing so.

On the Federal Prison Industries (FPI), Inc., website <http://www.unicor.gov>, you will find that FPI provides labor and services in seven major sectors: clothing and textiles, office furniture, industrial appliances, electronics, recycling, fleet management and vehicular components, and outsource services such as data and document conversion, e-business, electronic imaging, warehousing and much more.

But what about the prisoners? Do they share in the profits? Do they have any labor rights or protection?

FPI states that it employs and provides "skills training to the greatest practicable number of inmates confined within the system" and that it "contributes to the safety and security of our Nation's correctional facilities by keeping inmates constructively occupied," produces "market-price quality goods for sale to the Federal Government," and operates "in a self-sustaining manner; and minimize FPI's impact on private business and labor."

It may be good for inmates to be gainfully employed, but I'm sure most of them would rather be plying their trades and skills in the free market these days.

And in the end, how can other companies compete against what is essentially slave labor?

The other disturbing trend in the corrections arena is the presence of private companies employed to run the facilities and supervise the prison population.

Are these prison personnel actually law enforcement officers—sworn to uphold the Constitution and to guarantee the Bill of Rights are extended to the inmates—or are they employees of private agencies whose main concern is the bottom line.

Companies like Whackenhut and Corrections Corporation of America are major players in the world of prison building and management.

These private companies—not necessarily just those above—find themselves often in hot water for their sometimes murky practices.

Much of this private involvement in the prisons as well as the profiteering our government engages in is not well known by the public. Even the scamming by many prison guards is not an isolated but a systemic problem nobody likes to talk about.

Even the recent death of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson Freeman in the **Bay County Sheriff's Office Boot Camp** is shrouded in allegations of corruption, duplicity, and mystery.

Though the program was under the aegis of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), does anyone know who those guards were and by what subcontracting agency or company they were employed?

And now the FDLE, which oversees the program, is going to conduct “a fair and thorough investigation”?

Right.

The prison world is not one we are comfortable learning about, but perhaps more light should be shed upon what goes on inside the fences and behind the walls?

Now that it seems the nations' prison and correction agencies have become big business, shouldn't we suspect that the culture of corporate corruption we witness everyday might have seeped into this rather captive workplace?