

UK Probation Service to be privatised

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Last week, Chris Grayling, the minister of justice in the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government, announced plans to privatise 70 percent of the Probation Service in the UK, to be completed by spring 2015.

“Transforming Rehabilitation: a revolution in the way we manage offenders” states, “Private and voluntary sector organisations will work together on closing the ‘revolving door’ of the criminal justice system by tackling lower risk offenders.”

The reality is a massive boon to big business. Large multinational private companies such as Serco, G4S, and Sodexo, which have the infrastructure to bid for the proposed contracts based on larger geographical areas such as Greater Manchester or London and payment by results, will outbid any voluntary organisations and charities, despite the latter being offered £500,000 to bid.

With a budget of £4 billion for prisons and Offender Management, this means rich pickings for these companies.

The responsibility for public protection and high-risk offenders, who demand more resources, and suitably skilled, experienced, and qualified staff, will be supervised by a much-reduced Probation Service. Parole and court reports, risk assessments, and handling the breaching of court orders will also be retained by the Probation Service.

The areas open to privatisation are Community Payback (unpaid work in the community introduced by the previous Labour government), Approved Premises (probation hostels), Electronic Monitoring (curfew with tagging), Support Services, Attendance Centres, victim work, accredited rehabilitation programmes, Specified Activity Requirements, and the supervision and management of low risk of harm offenders, including supervision on release from prison.

Grayling also announced that offenders serving less

than 12 months’ custody (who have the highest recidivism rates, as they are currently not supervised by anybody) will now be supervised via the new contracts, adding 60,000 to the 240,000 a year already supervised by the Probation Service.

All future prisons will be private.

A new 2,000-place super prison, along with four new mini-prisons, will be built to replace seven older establishments that will close in the next three months. Bullwood Hall in Essex, Canterbury, Gloucester, Kingston in Portsmouth, Shepton Mallet in Somerset and Shrewsbury will all close by March, along with Camp Hill prison on the Isle of Wight. Cells in Chelmsford and Hull will also be decommissioned, with the total loss of 2,800 prison places.

The closures come after the G4S-run Oakwood Prison in Featherstone near Wolverhampton opened last year. The Oakwood facility has places for up to 1,605 prisoners at an annual cost of £13,200 per place, compared with up to £50,000 in some of the older prisons, according to the *Daily Telegraph*.

Profits will be made by reducing the numbers of staff, their wages and terms and conditions. A Prison Reform Trust report in 2005, “Private punishment: who profits?”, exposed the level of cuts likely to be imposed on probation workers when they are transferred over to private companies. Relating to private prisons, it states, “Many staff are young, inexperienced and have little prior knowledge of the prison system. And there are less of them: in private prisons, there are 17 percent fewer staff per prisoner. It is no surprise the staff turnover rate is at least double that in the public sector.”

The report continued, “The average basic salary for prison officers in state-run prisons in England and Wales in April 2003 was £23,071. In the private sector prisons it was £16,077, nearly a third less (Hansard, 23 March 2004). The average contracted working week is

two hours longer and annual leave is 23 days per year, rather than the 25 to 33 in the public sector. The overall package is more attractive in the public sector with better overtime pay and pension entitlements. When all these factors are combined the difference becomes even more stark, with estimates that staff in private prisons are up to 70 percent worse off than their public sector counterparts.”

Workers will be forced to accept worse conditions as private companies win contracts by putting in the lowest bid. They will be made redundant by the Prison and Probation Services, or they will be TUPE'd (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment] Regulations 2006) over to these companies.

With the agreement of the main unions, Napo (National Association of Probation Officers), UNISON and the POA (Prison Officer's Association), workers will be entitled to two years with the same conditions as previously but will then be reduced to those of the new employer.

However, what is more likely is that workers will be forced to sign new, less favourable contracts. This is true in other privatised sectors, such as that being prepared via a consortium set up in the South West of England of 19 National Health Service Trusts, for the 60,000 NHS staff in that area.

The unions have attempted to channel any opposition from workers into campaigns of writing letters of objection to Members of Parliament and the press, an e-petition, and to persuading MPs to sign an early day motion extolling the virtues and target achievements of the Probation Service despite budget and staffing cuts of up to 20 percent, causing greater workloads and staff stress and sickness, again facilitated by the unions. Napo, the largest probation union, boasts on its web site, “105 MPs from all parties had signed the motion including 12 Conservatives and 16 Liberal Democrats.”

On January 16, Napo called on its more than 9,000 members to attend a “series of [Ministry of Justice] sponsored consultative events on the Transforming Rehabilitation proposals” over the next weeks to “ensure a strong Napo presence”.

No industrial action is proposed by Napo to oppose the attacks. Instead, it proposes, alongside the Probation Chiefs Association and the Probation Association, it will be looking “at the possibilities of legal challenges and be querying every aspect with

[Ministry of Justice] Officials.”

Napo has claimed that the changes are being enforced by the coalition on “purely ideological grounds”, suggesting that a change in government will reverse these attacks. However, the privatisation process was started by the previous Labour government under the Offender Management Act 2007 which set out to “Make arrangements for the provision of probation services from a range of providers in the public, private and voluntary sectors.”

The cuts in probation are rather being carried out as part of a programme of mass austerity, supported by the Conservatives, Liberal and Labour, aimed at clawing back every gain won by the working class over decades of struggle. Workers in the public sector can only combat these attacks by linking up their struggles and forming action committees, independently of the unions, and by rejecting bankrupt appeals to parliament, the government or the Labour Party.



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