

UK prisoners “potential assets to be harnessed” for profit

John Newham
11 May 2016

The Conservative government’s Prisons Bill to be introduced in the Queen’s Speech this month is the latest stage in the privatisation of the prison service.

Justice Secretary Michael Gove’s proposed bill will introduce “reform prisons,” modelled on academy schools (state-funded, but privately run). They will be rated via league tables, including measures for re-offending rates. Provision is made for “failing” jails to be taken over by more successful prisons. Prison governors are to be given more autonomy over budgets and the deployment of staff.

Preparing the ground for the bill, David Cameron in February gave the first speech on prisons by a prime minister since fellow Tory John Major in the 1990s. He described the “failure of our system” as “scandalous,” as though this had nothing to do with previous government policy.

Cameron said prisoners should be seen as “potential assets to be harnessed.” This was packaged as improving education for prisoners with six jails set to be awarded “reform prison” status by the end of 2016. “Social enterprises” will be given contracts to improve education and employment outcomes, which will be used to mark out prisons deemed as failing for privatisation.

This model has been employed by successive governments to break up and privatise schools, the National Health Service, social services, probation and other public services. Individual trusts are established to break up previously integrated and centrally managed public services, and unrealistic performance targets and standards imposed as budget cuts and outsourcing contracts, staff and service cuts are introduced. With inevitable crises following, and the media attacking a “failing” service, this is used to justify “reforms” involving public services being run

for profit by private firms—channelling public funds into unaccountable private hands.

Citing the record-high prison population (currently standing at 85,930 in prisons and young offender institutions in England and Wales, the biggest in western Europe) and high re-offending rates (the justification to privatise the probation service), Gove was widely lauded in the media as a “progressive” reformer compared to his predecessor, Chris Grayling.

Under Grayling’s watch, building on powers introduced in the Offender Management Act 2007 by the then-Labour government, 75 percent of the probation service was sold off, Legal Aid was cut and courts were closed. Around 7,500 prison officer jobs were lost between 2010 and 2014.

Despite denials from government, staff reductions in prisons led to an overcrowding crisis, a rise in inmate violence and deaths, and an explosion in the use of drugs, as there were not enough staff to supervise prisoners safely.

The total number of assaults, 18,874 in 2015, jumped by 19 percent compared with 2014. There were 4,568 recorded assaults on prison staff in the year to September, up 30 percent year on year. In the same period, there were 30,706 reported incidents of self-harm, up 24 percent on the previous year; 257 prisoner deaths occurred in 2015, up from 242 in 2014, and 153 in 2006. In the year to the end of March 2011, there were 3,700 drug seizures, a rise of nearly 4,500 in 2013-2014.

A report by the then-chief inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick, said, “Staff shortages, overcrowding and a rising level of violence fuelled by a rapid increase in the use of legal highs have all contributed to a significant overall decline in safety.”

Last week, staff at Wormwood Scrubs prison in

London walked out due to concerns over safety, after citing alleged assaults by inmates. The staff walked out despite it being illegal since 1997 for prison officers to take industrial action.

This followed a recent damning report by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons, finding the prison was rat-infested and overcrowded.

These deplorable conditions are being used to justify the further privatisation of the prison service, with old Victorian prisons in prime city-centre locations being sold and more than £1 billion spent on building nine new privately run prisons.

Holloway prison in London, the biggest women's jail in western Europe, with 500 inmates, is the first to be earmarked for closure. The 10-acre site is valued at £200 million, at least. Wormwood Scrubs, and Norwich prison, valued at £50 million, could also be on the list as property developers salivate at the potential for big profits given the inflated UK housing market.

Privatisation of the prison service started when the Conservative government gave a short-term contract to multinational security company Group 4 (now G4S) to operate the newly built, publicly owned HMP Prison Wolds. The 1997 Labour government continued the privatisation process, utilising the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Designed, Constructed, Managed and Financed (DCMF) prisons. The contracts run for 25 years, after which the building becomes the property of the Prison Service. HMP Altcourse, opened in December 1997, was the UK's first DCMF prison.

There are 14 private prisons contractually managed by private companies such as G4S Justice Services, Serco Custodial Services and Sodexo Justice Service, which between them hold 13,500 prisoners (15 percent of the UK's prison population).

Birmingham prison was the first to be transferred from public management to the private sector in October 2011. G4S won the 15-year contract, worth £468.3 million.

Private prisons have been plagued by problems. HMP Wolds opened in 1992. Twenty years later, inspectors found that it had "clear weaknesses," with poor behaviour and high levels of drug use among inmates.

In 2008, 10 of the 11 private prisons in England and Wales came in the bottom quarter of the Ministry of Justice's prison performance league table.

Prison privatisation will gather apace, given the

lucrative profits available via taxpayers' money and through the employment of prisoners via the new training and education initiative.

In 2012, the *Corporate Watch* web site reported on of G4S's "Exploitation of the cheap, captive labour of prisoners." It had "400 prisoners working 40 hours a week in its six prisons, being paid next to nothing. At Altcourse prison in Liverpool, G4S worked with Norpro, an engineering firm that had converted three former metal workshops into a factory floor using 25 prisoners to produce high-quality office furniture 'at an economic price.'"

Labour could be done so cheaply by prisoners that "work previously done in India had been brought back to the UK and done in the prison. At Wolds in East Yorkshire, a digital marketing company called Summit Media, which started inside the prison more than a decade earlier, had a turnover of £30 million."

G4S launched a PR campaign, "Working Prisons: Working People," to urge the UK business community to "open its mind to the growth opportunities from being involved in 'working prisons.'"

One of the "benefits to business" listed by G4S was "a committed workforce and low overheads. ... We have a dedicated workforce with a variety of skills which can work around business' needs with the minimum of bureaucracy."

G4S hoped these types of prisons would "become the norm" in the future.

With the cost of £40,000 and above to incarcerate a person for a year in the UK, and the cheaper labour costs and lower staff numbers in private prisons, huge profits can be reaped.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact