

US private prison industry thrives under Trump

Shelley Connor
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On Thursday, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a memo rescinding an order by the Obama Justice Department aimed at reducing government reliance upon for-profit prisons. Immediately upon the memo's issuance, stocks of private prison companies soared; GEO Group, which contributed \$225,000 to Trump's election campaign, saw its stock price increase by 40 percent.

Beset by criticism about the deplorable conditions in which inmates in these prisons lived, and frequently died, for-profit prisons grabbed eagerly onto Donald Trump's campaign pronouncements that government-run prisons were "a disaster" and that private companies could excel where the government failed at addressing overcrowding, violence, and inadequate healthcare.

In the wake of Obama's order, which, in reality, only hinted at reform, private prison operators contributed heavily to Trump's campaign. In addition to the aforementioned GEO Group, Core Civic, formerly Corrections Corporation of America, donated \$250,000 to Trump's inauguration committee.

In 2012, a riot in a prison run by Core Civic, the largest US for-profit prison company, injured 20 and left a corrections officer dead. The facility, a federal prison in Adams, Mississippi, was populated almost completely by immigrants who had been convicted of federal crimes.

When prisoners gathered in the prison yard to protest the lack of adequate healthcare, corrections officers hurled tear gas into the crowd. The act ignited the seething discontent into a riot, one of four that occurred in privately-run federal prisons between 2008 and 2012. All of the riots were caused by the same conditions over which the prisoners in Adams protested; most especially poor sanitation and inadequate healthcare.

Cost-cutting measures in these prisons had led to numerous inmate deaths. In many cases, inmates with serious illnesses were left to the care of low-level medical staff who were not competent in managing serious illnesses.

In other cases, acutely ill prisoners were denied hospital transfers that would have saved their lives. Prisoners with HIV and tuberculosis were treated by licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and released for work. A man died of complications of AIDS in 2011 in Adams, one year prior to the deadly riot.

The cost-cutting measures that have proved so deadly for inmates have been highly profitable for Core Civic and other private prison operators. Dismayed employees of the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) left the bureau after their efforts at advocating for better treatment fell on the desks of disinterested superiors. Meanwhile BOP employees who were flagrantly derelict in assuring reasonable living conditions were rewarded with high-paying positions by Core Civic.

Corporate federal prison management contracts emerged as part of the Clinton administration's "reinvention of government" in the early 1990s. Although multiple BOP studies demonstrated that privatization was a failed experiment, the immigration policies of George W. Bush and his successor, Barack Obama, represented a golden opportunity for privatized prison companies.

As the so-called "war on terror" metastasized, no longer would undocumented immigrants be deported immediately when caught at the border; instead, they would be convicted and imprisoned under zero-tolerance immigration policies. Whereas previously, undocumented immigrants who managed to settle in the US had most frequently been released with a court date upon being caught, they were now more frequently

imprisoned.

With the population of federal prisons swelling by tens of thousands within a short time, the overextended BOP was running out of space to house prisoners. Mike Janus, the first administrator of the bureau's privatization management branch, left the BOP in 2005 in order to take positions with private-prison companies. In his view, privatized prisons offered a more viable solution than simply not imprisoning immigrants.

"Why train them in the trades and give them GEDs and all that other stuff if they're going to go back to Mexico or Ethiopia?," Janus told the *Nation* in 2016. In his view, private prisons "didn't have to be better, didn't have to be cheaper;" they just "made sense" as a way of making space. Today, private prisons house three-quarters of those detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Janus, meanwhile, "earned" \$1.6 million as Core Civic's vice president in 2015.

When the Obama administration issued the order to phase out most of the private contracts with federal prisons, it amounted to political showmanship. The order did not address the use of the prisons by immigration authorities, nor did it address the many privately-run state prisons. Furthermore, despite Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates's remarks on the inhumane conditions that thrive in private prisons, the BOP actually renewed contracts with Core Civic and GEO Group immediately after the Department of Justice's orders.

Even this weak posturing, however, would not be tolerated by the private prison industry. They ramped up their lobbying efforts in order to regain their profits. GEO Group hired two of Jeff Sessions's former aides as lobbyists in October 2016 in the eleventh hour of the election season.

Thus far, the private prison industry's investment in Trump and Sessions appears to be paying off. Nowhere, perhaps, will Session's memos resound so loudly as in immigrant detention centers.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in response to Trump's executive orders aimed at cracking down on immigrant workers, issued sweeping new guidelines aimed at streamlining the deportation process. This includes counting immigrants who have committed minor infractions, such as traffic

violations or using a fake Social Security number, as "risks to public safety or national security" who can be imprisoned and then deported with far fewer hurdles and oversight than in the past.

Trump's policies overlook the obvious sources of prison overcrowding and its attendant violence. Punitive sentencing guidelines, harsh treatment of immigrants, and the overall criminalization of the working class, both native born and immigrant, have led to situations such as the riot at Adams.

Yet again, the travails of workers are translated into private profit by elected officials acting at the behest of corporate interests. Private prison companies have not issued any feasible plans to improve the health and sanitation of their facilities, nor has the Trump administration. Nevertheless, the number of prisoners is set to explode, and with it, the disease, death, and riots that have already plagued inmates in these prisons across the US.



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