

UK businesses call for prisoners to be used to plug labour shortage

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Food manufacturers are calling on the UK government to allow them to exploit prison labour.

The British Meat Processors Association and the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (AIMS) are reported to have approached prisons directly and to have spoken to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to discuss the recruitment of current prisoners and ex-offenders. But other sectors, from hospitality to care homes, are said to be considering the move.

Tony Goodger for AIMS said, “Much of the food industry is facing a recruitment crisis,” with 14,000 job vacancies in the meat business. The British Poultry Council reports a vacancy rate of more than 16 percent, approximately 7,000 jobs.

Goodger said he had contacted HMP (Her Majesty's Prison) Hollesley Bay in Suffolk in August but was told the demand for inmates was so great that it had reached its quota. Usually, those available for work are in open prisons and coming to the end of their sentence who are released on temporary licence (ROTL), of which there are just 3,000 in England and Wales.

Moves to employ inmates are being presented as part of a new “rehabilitative” approach, with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) stating, “Helping prisoners find jobs during their sentence and after release makes it much less likely they will reoffend. We will support all industries with skills shortages where possible.”

Penal servitude was abolished in 1948 in England and Wales (1950 in Scotland and 1953 in Northern Ireland). For almost 200 years up until then, the transportation of convicts to the colonies was a feature of the consolidation of Britain's Empire. Imprisonment with hard labour included the treadmill, the most famous victim of which was Irish novelist and playwright Oscar Wilde.

Any gains from its abolition were rapidly lost. Prisoners are meant to engage in “purposeful activity”, although not necessarily paid labour. Those on work programmes earn a minimum weekly wage of £4. But years of “law and order” policies, combined with massive cuts to public services,

means England and Wales have the largest prison population in Western Europe, at almost 79,000 in November 2020—173 prisoners per 100,000 of the population. Rehabilitative measures have largely been jettisoned, with most prisoners confined to their cells for much of the day.

Until now, the UK has not emulated the United States, where convict labour is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Direct employment of inmates is relatively small scale, from the Turkey producer Bernard Matthews to the Timpson Group. But more recently inmates at HMP Leyhill, Gloucestershire have been employed on minimum wage to build eco-homes for Torbay Council, with their wages placed into a fund overseen by the prison governor, and which can only be accessed for housing.

Frances Crook, Chief Executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, wrote in the *Guardian* that many prisoners “would jump at the chance to get out of their cells and do something useful”, and urged, “Let firms set up shop inside prisons, as I have done, but inmates get the same wages and employment rights as anyone else.”

There is no chance of that. Crook notes that a commercial graphic design studio set up by the Howard League at Coldingley prison, Surrey ran “successfully for years until the prison authorities realised that, because they paid income tax, the prisoners had employment rights.”

The MoJ said prisoners hired by meat companies would get paid, unless unpaid work was part of their sentence and that “wages would vary according to which businesses inmates work for” but would “probably be less than what an ordinary member of the public would earn.”

This is the real impulse for a return to penal servitude, especially under conditions of a significant labour shortage. Virtually all sectors are impacted. Most attention has focussed on the lack of HGV drivers, a shortage upwards of 90,000, which is blamed for emptying supermarket shelves. But from hospitality to health and social care, it is a growing complaint.

The source of the shortages is manifold. Britain's exit from the European Union, on December 31, 2020, has seen

an estimated one million non-UK born residents leave the country, 700,000 in London alone.

The pro-Brexit campaign centred on claims that the UK would be able to “take back” control of its borders and clampdown on EU migration. EU citizens already employed on that date were able to continue living and working in the UK, provided they registered, but anyone coming to work afterwards requires a visa.

The Brexit deadline came only weeks before the world was notified of the deadly COVID-19 global pandemic. Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, like many the world over, first tried to ignore and then play down the dangers. It openly proclaimed a policy of “herd immunity”, allowing the virus to spread through the population.

In the face of wildcat strikes and protests, it was forced into a lock down at the end of March 2020, but only after it had organised a £330 billion bailout of the corporations and super-rich and £895 billion in quantitative easing—money printing—almost equal to that over the 11 years following the financial crash in 2008.

In October Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared “let the bodies pile up in their thousands. No more f**cking lockdowns” and has been true to his word. With the support of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress, all mitigation measures have been abandoned. This centres on keeping schools open despite the known dangers in order to force parents into unsafe workplaces and recoup profits.

The result is a health and social catastrophe. More than 7.2 million people in the UK have been infected, and more than 159,000 people have died. Between November 2020 and February 2021 COVID-19 was the leading cause of death in both England and Wales.

Details of the ages and occupations of those who have died are barely counted, According to government figures, almost 8,000 working age adults died from COVID between March 9 and December 28. Those most at risk were men in “elementary” and service jobs, and women in factories and “caring” occupations. Cases among young and working adults are now rising exponentially.

The numbers stricken with ongoing health complications are unknown. This includes not only Long COVID but thousands unable to access treatment for cancer, cardiology and other critical care due to the severe strains on the National Health Service, which has a 5.45 million people on its waiting list. The number of deaths from all causes was 12.1 percent above the five-year average in the week ending August 27, 2021.

The virus has impacted most on the most exploited and socially vulnerable. Not for nothing has COVID-19 been deemed a “disease of the poor”.

For almost four decades, the ruling elite, whether

represented by the Tories or Labour, have carried out a social counter-revolution against the gains and conditions of the working class. Years of deindustrialisation and cheap labour jobs, reinforced by austerity, meant that even before the pandemic wages over the preceding 17 years had been falling—the longest period since the beginning of the 19th century. More than half of those below the official poverty line come from working families, as wage cuts and freezes have been policed by the trade unions.

Those celebrated as “essential workers” during the pandemic are especially exploited. HGV drivers worked long hours for a median hourly pay of £11.80, with the result that average age of drivers is 55. Wages in the food processing plants average £8.91.

Individual firms in certain sectors have sought to resolve their immediate problem by offering “golden handshakes” and a slight increases in wages. Even so, starting salaries are estimated to have increased by just 3.5 percent on average, following a 1.5 percent fall in the year to June 2020.

Solving the shortage through real improvements in overall wages and conditions is off the agenda as far as the financial oligarchy is concerned. The government has already imposed a freeze on public sector wages. At the end of this month, it will withdraw furlough support to almost 1.8 million workers and six million people on Universal Credit are to lose the £20 per week “pandemic top-up”. Together with limiting increases to pensions to just 2.5 percent and a 10 percent hike in National Insurance Contributions, these measures are aimed at making the working class pay the costs of the pandemic crisis.

The primary instrument enabling the imposition of these attacks is the trade unions. Speaking to the annual Trades Union Congress conference this week, General Secretary Frances O’Grady called on the government to “Invite unions in with employers. Get us around the table, and let’s make that industry deliver decent conditions, direct employment and a proper pay rise.”

Her example of a “proper pay rise?” £10 per hour for social care workers, approximately 50 pence per hour above the current average rate, and below the Living Wage.



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