

"SLAVERY IN THE U.S."

Should an enlightened nation, one which has fought long and hard to overcome the ugly stain that slavery left upon its history, have a literal exception to the abolition of slavery written into its constitution? It should not. Yet, the U.S. constitution does in fact have such an exception. It declares that noone is to be enslaved and forced to labor "unless" he is convicted of a crime.

Now, I would be the first person to say that a person, whether a free citizen or a prison inmate, should pull his own weight and do what he can to support himself. I don't, however, believe that ANY person should be ENSLAVED... especially not for profit. Yet, that is precisely what occurs within the Texas prison system.

The federal prison system and the majority of state prison systems decline to take advantage of the slavery exception in the constitution. They assign their inmates jobs, but they pay them for their labor. The "wages" are a pittance and may be laughable to outside observers, but when a person has nothing, as is the case with the majority of prisoners, a little becomes a lot. Even 30¢ an hour can get an inmate a tube of toothpaste and deodorant from the commissary by the end of a work week.

There are, however, a handful of states who take full advantage of the constitutional exception to the abolition of slavery, none more so than Texas. In Texas, an inmate is given a job assignment and forced to work or receive a disciplinary case, period. Not only will he have to work what is often an extremely laborious job, such as "the fields", or a job that fiscally benefits the state and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) such as the tag plants, sign shops, furniture factories, etc. without receiving any form of recompensation whatsoever, but, in a case of insult to injury, if he ever needs any kind of medical or dental attention, he will be charged a 100\$ "co-pay fee".

(TDCJ would argue that it "pays" its inmates for labor with good-time and work credits. However, a very large number of TDCJ inmates are serving aggravated sentences, myself included. An aggravated sentence renders those good time/work credits invalid as they do not count toward one's sentence.)

Texas exploits the slavery exception in the vilest manner - by profiting from inmate labor. There are numerous examples of this, but I will simply use two herein to make this point.

First, TDCJ has enacted policies under which inmates cannot receive any form of stationery products from outside vendors, thus securing a monopoly on such items as, for example, writing tablets. Then, they have unpaid inmates (slaves) on the Hobby Unit Printing factory make these items which they then SELL back to inmates in the prison commissaries at an inflated price.) (The writing tablets cost \$1.85 on commissary each, whereas previously an inmate

could often receive a full dozen higher-quality legal pads from outside vendors for six or seven dollars.) If just 100,000 of the 150,000-plus inmates in TDCJ go to commissary once a month and purchase just one of these pads, TDCJ will make 185,000\$ from that single product made by unpaid inmates.)

Second, unpaid trustee inmates drive tractors that gather cotton from TDCJ cotton fields. This cotton is sent to prison textile mills where other unpaid inmates turn it into clothing material. This material is in turn sent to Texas Correctional Industries (TCI) garment factories where inmates use much of it to make gym shorts and tee-shirts. TDCJ then turns around and sells these items back to the inmates at exorbitant rates. A missewn TCI tee-shirt costs 6\$ or more on prison commissaries while better-quality, name-brand tee-shirts can be purchased in 3-packs at Wal-mart for less. Of course, inmates are unable to go to Wal-mart and TDCJ does not allow inmates to receive items from outside vendors or even receive care packages from loved ones. Thus they have secured another monopoly and another avenue to profit from inmate labor when they are forced to buy back the very clothing they created at no cost to TDCJ.

As I said, those are just two examples of TDCJ's exploitation of inmate labor and its taking advantage of the constitution's slavery exception. While I am sure many will agree that there should not be any exception to the abolition of slavery in this nation, I am even more certain that any non-biased person would agree that exploiting that exception in order to profit from the very ones who are being forced to labor is wrong on every level.

Either slavery is wrong or it is not. This should not be a circumstantial issue and there certainly should not be any exception to the abolition of slavery in the U.S. constitution...but there is.

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