

Kentucky Prisoners Respond to Low Quality Food

with Rioting, Fires, and Legal Action

by Corey John Richardson

After spending most of 2009 defending its draconian Persistent Felony Offender laws which place the state No. 1 for incarceration rates, now Kentucky's new DOC commissioner, Ms. LaDonna Thompson, is faced with the Herculean task of defending Aramark and its prison food service contract. Aramark's transgressions are legendary. Newspapers and lawsuits across this country have chronicled the behemoth's shameless tactics of serving minuscule portions and rotted food to prisoners to improve their profit margins. Florida succeeded in ousting Aramark, and now KY State Rep. Brent Yonts (D), whose son is serving time in state prison, is attempting to do the same.

Throughout KY prisons complaints and non-violent sit-ins have occurred since Aramark's arrival in 2005. Then in the Spring of 2009, 300 prisoners at KY's Western Kentucky Correctional Facility fell ill due to a foodborne disease. The issue has decidedly come to a boil after an August 2009 riot and fire which effectively destroyed approximately 50 percent of the North Point Training Center which formerly housed 1200 men was linked to the food quality. (So much for the monetary savings of using the private food contractor.) Subsequent prisoner surveys and inquiry not only link the riot to the food issue, but point to the fact that KY state prisoners are growing angrier



over the low quality of food and small portions. One prisoner simply pleaded in a survey, "I would like to not be hungry all the time."

While the KDOC has tentatively admitted that the Western Kentucky facility incident was related to Aramark's substandard sanitation and food handling, they have pushed back against the idea that the food issue created the crisis at North Point. In recent hearings, Aramark and the KDOC defended the current food service and attempted to link the intensity of the prison riot to other issues. A lawsuit currently being filed on behalf of KY state prisoners alleges, among other things, that human feces, worms, and bugs have been found in prison food. Whether Rep. Yonts' bill to remove Aramark from yet another prison system passes or not, this Inside Correspondent would like to make two rather grisly facts perfectly clear: 1) the small amounts of food going in usually look, smell, and most probably taste the same coming out; and 2) with worsening prison crowding occurring even before the riot that displaced 700 North Point prisoners throughout the system and state deficits running at all time highs, the KDOC can hardly stand too many more riots over food.

p.s. It would behoove other states to think twice before they jump into bed with Aramark.