

THE COMPANY STORE

by Dennis Minton

In the 1800's and early 1900's, there was something called "The Company Store". Businesses, such as mining companies and railroads, would run a store for employees. Usually, the store was the only one for many miles. Sometimes, the employees were not allowed to shop anywhere else. What virtually all of them had in common was that their prices were incredibly high. About 70 years or so ago, the US Government outlawed the "Company Store".

But... the Company Store still exists - in the prison system. Inmates work for the prison for pennies per hour. Then, if they want to buy anything with their hard-earned money, there is only one place to go: the contractor contracted by the Dept. of Corrections to sell their goods.

First, the prices of most of the items are high - often higher than convenience store prices. This would be bad enough if an inmate made minimum wage. But, when you only earn 40¢ per hour - you have to work 3 or 4 hours just for enough money for a decent bar of soap!

Second, what most people don't know is that the DOC usually adds on a "surcharge". For example, in the Idaho system, all commissary items are marked up an extra 10%. When this was set up, it was called the "Inmate Welfare Fund"; and went to pay for chapel

items, gym equipment, and educational materials. Now, however, it just goes into a fund that pays for whatever the leadership thinks it needs to. Even officer salaries.

If this sort of thing went on "in public", this scheme would be shut down immediately. It doesn't even do for an inmate to complain. Staff just tells you, "you don't have to buy anything."

It's time to get rid of these monopolies that take advantage of prisoners. It's time to abolish the "Company Store" once and for all!