

Strategic Thoughts on How to Unionize Exploited Prisoners

by Jason Goudlock

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) president Mary Kay Henry recently stated in a USA Today opinion-editorial that her union's endorsing of a 2020 presidential candidate will be conditioned on the candidate's support of her union's "Unions for all" initiative. This is an initiative to get the U.S. to adopt a new set of all-inclusive labor laws.

Henry further stated that due to nearly half of all U.S. workers being legally excluded from the right to bargain collectively, that it was time for the U.S. "to update our [labor] laws," that is, so that disenfranchised workers can be granted the legal right to negotiate for the earning of a fair wage.

Outlining her union's agenda, Henry pointed out that U.S. labor laws, which were established by way of 1935's National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), were brought into existence to "encourage collective bargaining" for the benefit of the manufacturing industry. Back then, this was America's largest industry, composed of mainly an all-White male labor force.

Excluded from the collective bargaining table, however, were the industry sectors that employed mainly women and people of color, such as sectors of agriculture and domestic service work. Henry said that the labor laws written in 1935 are responsible for the marginalization of millions of workers today in the U.S. who, under federal law, aren't entitled to union rights.

Henry and her union's initiative to unionize all workers, most certainly, is a progressive agenda. Without including the demand that America's most ignored and exploited class of working people -- that is, prisoners -- be granted the legal right to bargain collectively for a fair wage, it is also an incomplete and indisputably hypocritical one!

As a prisoner who has been imprisoned almost 26 consecutive years, by no means am I under any illusion that the U.S. status quo would ever willingly relinquish their stronghold that they have on America's exploited and imprisoned working class. With hundreds of thousands of prisoners being exploited and forced to work for a meager wage, or even worse, for nothing at all, the booming business of exploiting prisoners is too lucrative an industry for the status quo to do an about face solely for the sake of morality. Systems of oppression must be made to stop their oppressive ways by some show of force.

With that said, it is my belief that the only way that U.S. captive prisoners are going to ever earn a fair wage and bring about an end to being exploited is by organizing and forming their own Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) prison labor union chapters. These chapters would then stage coordinated labor strikes as needed.

If it wasn't for the hijacked labor of prisoners who cook the food, cut the grass, collect the trash, clean the cellblocks, shovel the snow, and operate the sweatshops for billion-dollar corporations such as Walmart and McDonald's, prisons would not be able to operate efficiently.

In a time when many prisoners are easily distracted, discouraged, and intimidated by oppressive prison administrations, the organizing of captive laborers is something that calls for critical strategizing and practical application.

A strategic idea that I'm cultivating and seeking to implement is the launching of a grassroots outreach initiative to generate the support of dozens of radio stations nationwide who would be willing to allow prisoner rights labor representatives, such as the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) to broadcast weekly programs to a targeted prisoner audience.

It's my belief that prisoners would regularly tune-in and begin to organize unions and union chapters if they were to hear on the radio that people in society are truly seeking to help them empower themselves. Plus, in addition to prisoners gaining organizational insight and having their morale elevated, the vehicle of broadcast radio would also circumvent prison administration's capability to censor and interfere with the conveying of information to prisoners. It would also most certainly contribute to the broadening of the national dialogue about the massive incarceration of poor people of color.

With this in mind, I conclude by saying that in spite of what the racist language in the 13th Amendment states, that there shall be no slavery or involuntary servitude in the U.S. except for the punishment of a crime, prisoners are not slaves or leasable human beings. Their labor, as well as their mind, body, and soul, belong to them!

Power, as all revolutionaries know, belongs to the People.

Learn more about this Ohio political prisoner, who is the subject of the feature-length documentary film [Invisible Chess: A Jason Goudlock Story](#), as well as the author of the novel [Brother of the Struggle](#), by visiting [FreeJasonGoudlock.org](#).

Jason Goudlock is a progressive writer embedded in the struggle against the repressive United States prison industrial complex. If you would like to offer him support on his quest to attain justice for Ohio old-law prisoners, you can contact him at the following:

*Jason Goudlock #284-561
P.O. Box 80033
Toledo, OH 43608*

Learn more about Jason Goudlock and his struggle for freedom at [freejasongoudlock.org](#).