

PRISON FACTORIES EMPLOY CONVICTED FELONS. CRITICS SAY GOVERNMENT REWARDING CONVICTS, JOBS SHOULD GO TO LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS



Many factories, located in federal prisons, employ convicted felons to work for them on the pretext that it is the way of rehabilitating them back to civil society. This has led to a lot of contentious debate with the anti-lobby claiming that felons do not deserve to be doing jobs that should rightly be given to law-abiding citizens. Moreover, they allege that the rehabilitation theory is only a pretext to get employees at much less mandated wages, employees who work without being absent and who dare not complain about working conditions. Congressional Republicans, a few Democrats and affected-industry people have called for closure of Unicor, the commercial name for Federal Prison Industries. However, that the federal government would be very reluctant to do given that it earned the government \$ 900 million last year and is the Fed's 36th biggest vendor. Rep. Bill Huizenga, R-Mich., has proposed legislation that will stop making it mandatory for federal agencies to buy goods, when possible from Unicor. It is estimated that there are around 13,000 prisoners working in federal lockups all over the country making a variety of products that include apparel, furniture, electrical parts and goods for the military. The goods they manufacture are meant exclusively for federal agencies. Not only do they work for a pittance, their employers are not subject to normal employer grievances like tardiness, absences or legal notices. Nor do they have to pay any worker benefits. Fed officials claim that such employment provides them with much needed job skills and inculcates discipline in them, which makes them leave lives of crime and seek fruitful employment. Studies have shown that inmates, who work, are 24 percent less likely to return to a world of crime after serving their term. Philip J. Sibal, senior deputy assistant director of Federal Prison Industries, said that to the outside world it may seem like a business where inmates produce goods, but the real product are the prisoners themselves who from being criminals become contributing members of society. Prison officials say that what private industry does not realize is that where their workers are skilled and competent ours are novices. Convicted felons have to be taught how to work. The idea behind is not the profits, but correcting the felons, they say. However, Misti Keeton does not share Sibal's view. Her company is laying-off 50 workers; she fears could be one of them, as it lost a contract to make Air Force uniforms to Unicor. She was 'terrified,' she said and wondered how she would bring up her two teenagers. "If I lose this job, I don't know what I'm supposed to feed them," she said, tears welling in her eyes. Critics have been saying all along that private countries find it impossible to compete with Unicor as it costs them much more to produce the goods as such cheap labor is not available to them. Moreover, Unicor does not have to pay benefits to their workers, which private employers are compelled to do. At the Talladega prison factory prisoners were found to be making \$150 per month whereas at American Power Source, workers averaged \$1,480 a month for practically identical work. The prison industry program was commenced by President Roosevelt, ironically during the Great Depression in 1934. Ever since then the private jobs versus rehabilitating prisoners has been going on. What is interesting is that, back then the American Federation of Labor opposed the prison-based factories for the same reasons as today, that with the unemployed rate being what it is, law abiding citizens should get every single available job and it should not go anywhere else. Today the unemployment rate is 7.9 percent, then it was 22 percent.