International Labor and Working-Class History (2022), **101**, 1–9
doi:10.1017/S0147547922000126

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction

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Twenty-first century carceral and coerced labor are global billion-dollar industries. Over eleven million people, convicted of a range of offenses, are currently imprisoned worldwide in prisons, jails, secure mental-health units, immigration detention centers, and work camps.[1] Chinese authorities are accused of forcibly detaining more than one million Uyghurs in a large network of "re-education camps" while hundreds of thousands of others are serving prison terms.[2] Millions more people, without criminal records, are enmeshed in modern slavery in private homes, businesses, and factories around the world. Examples of a depressingly inexhaustible number of cases include: Global fashion brands seeking to avoid "first-world" labor costs have been accused of using child labor (Nike in Cambodia; Benetton in Turkey) and prison labor (Adidas in China) in developing countries or overseas economies where workers are paid less and have fewer rights and protections.[3] Over the past fifteen years, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has successfully prosecuted several farm-labor servitude operations in Florida where employers used threats and violence to hold workers captive, including U.S. born citizens and undocumented immigrants.[4]

According to *World Prison Brief*, the countries with the highest prison populations are: the United States (over two million); China (over 1.69 million); Brazil (over 811,000); India (around 478,000); and the Russian Federation (around 471,000).[5] In 2013, the *Economist* reported that forty-three percent of men and sixty percent of women in Russian Federation prisons worked some or all of the time.[6] As discussed below, approximately two-thirds of prisoners in state penitentiaries in the United States participate in work programs, including cleaning, cooking, and laundry, agricultural work, road and park maintenance, garment manufacture, and specialist and "white-collar" roles for external companies. UNICOR for Federal Prison Industries (FPI) also allows the private sector to create jobs for incarcerated individuals, often in manufacturing of clothing and furniture as well as call center services, 3D modelling, and similar jobs. Able-bodied prisoners in several U.S. states and federal prisons are required by law to work.[7] Indeed, many legally incarcerated people across the world work inside their institution of confinement, in upkeep jobs or providing translation, health-care, and educational services for other prisoners. Others produce industrial goods and agricultural products or perform specialist work for private companies.

The special feature section in this volume of *International Labor and Working-Class History* therefore offers timely focus on unfree labor. Shennette Garrett-Scott's study of industrial sewing schools created exclusively for African

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American women by Northern freedmen's aid societies, Union army officials, and the Freedmen's Bureau investigates the intertwining nature of labor processes, racialization, carceral spaces, and philanthro-capital, and its role in extracting profit from marginalized female workers. It examines how white matrons surveilled and undermined Black women and girl's freedom by exploiting their labor and refusing to compensate them for their services. The Civil War and post-Civil War industrial sewing schools were a key site for experimenting with and controlling freedwomen's labor and just one of many carceral spaces where Black women and girls experienced exploitation post-emancipation.

Natalie Rech's article recovers the forgotten histories of African American female prisoners confined between 1900 and 1960 at Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana, a former slave plantation that is now a huge super-maximum-security facility, to excavate the stories of Black women held in domestic carceral servitude and the ways in which it reinforced penal and free-world race, class, and gender hierarchies. Ariel Ludwig's ethnographic study of unwaged prisoners and waged employees in the North Infirmary Command in one of nine New York City jails on Rikers Island in 2017 explores the "multiplicities of duress across the labor of incarcerated peoples, corrections officers, and health care workers" and the intersectional dynamics of waged labor, penal work, and prisoner hierarchies. These three articles collectively expose invisible labor in settings where people have been historically confined and forced or coerced to work. These spaces have always included plantations, prisons, jails, asylums, workhouses, work camps, and private homes. They also broaden scholarly conceptualizations of carceral labor and expand contemporary definitions of carceral spaces. More importantly, they offer a historical context for understanding the ongoing crisis of mass incarceration.

By the mid-2010s, the United States had under five percent of the world's population and around twenty-two percent of its prisoners.[8] This nation's late modern shift to mass incarceration and the perpetual wars on drugs, as well as popular and legislative support for punitive, expressive, and racialized punishments, harsher and longer prison sentences, gang injunctions, and a raft of curfews and anti-loitering laws (that echo the post-Civil War expansion of vagrancy and public order statutes) are well-documented by criminologists, historians, legal scholars, policymakers, filmmakers, journalists, prisoners, and former prisoners. For more than thirty years, politicians on all sides, and many ordinary Americans, believed, and continue to believe, that the United States can punish its way out of social problems, chronic welfare and unemployment challenges, and crime and violence. Federal and state prisoner numbers rose from around 200,000 in the mid-1970s to over one million by the mid-1990s and twenty years later to over two million. Many critics contend that mass incarceration has spawned an enslaved prison labor force that often seems beyond public scrutiny.[9]

In reality, penal labor is a longstanding feature of the modern and post-modern United States' correctional systems with deep roots in earlier colonial and slavery-era practices; a sentence of "confinement at hard labor" was a staple of Anglo-American penal practice by the mid-nineteenth century. Prisoners in established and expanding sections of the early republic and nineteenth-century United States were expected to work in order to pay for their upkeep, for disciplinary reasons, so state governments

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

could profit from their labor, and ostensibly as a means of reformation. Male prisoners made rope, nails, furniture, wagons, barrels, carpets, rifles, hats, and clothing in prison workshops for private manufacturers who bid for their labor. Prisoners were used to plant and harvest cash-crops and other agricultural tasks, to mine coal and quarry stone, to build houses, factories, and new prisons, and as blacksmiths, tanners, engineers, physicians' assistants, and clerks. Race and class privileges dictated work assignments, disciplinary and material conditions, and the apportionment of rewards.[10]

Convict-leasing was symbiotically tied to post-Civil War southern prison systems and post-emancipation political-economies as prison populations became predominately young, working-class African American men and women. Their labor was sold by southern state governments to local planters as well as major railroad, lumber, naval stores, and coal mining and steel producing companies. During the early twentieth-century, road construction, often performed by gangs of predominately Black, and some white, chained prison laborers replaced convict leasing across the South.[11] After emancipation, Black women and girls' labor continued to be commodified through industrial sewing schools, marking the shift from one form of unfree labor to another. These individuals were no longer owned by enslavers, but their status as freed people remained under state control; those accused of vagrancy could be arrested and put to work. As Shennette Garrett-Scott's article reveals, the sewing schools represented an alternative to incarceration, but Black female workers encountered similar material conditions.

Women comprised a very small number of prisoners in any nineteenth-century prison system, and prior to the construction of separate women's institutions, were often housed alongside or near to male prisoners. They were frequently employed in domestic work, washing and sewing guard and prisoner uniforms, as cooks, cleaners, and carers, and as servants for white, male, lower-middle and middle-class officials.[12] The essential work performed by Black female prisoners was frequently denigrated as unproductive and economically worthless by the same officials and their political masters; this was a recurring theme in all types of prisons in every region of the nineteenth-century United States. Deliberate undervaluing of women prisoners' economic worth and their labor continued in the twentieth century, as highlighted in Natalie Rech's analysis of "domestic carceral servitude" in twentieth-century Angola.[13]

Prior to World War II, the largest prison populations were mainly in Northern states. Prison-manufactured clothing, furnishings, and agricultural products were sold on the open market despite decades of vociferous and bitter protest by free-world wage-earners who complained their wages and job security were being undercut by cheaper prison labor costs and prices. Nineteen-twenties restrictions shifted southern production. Depression-era restrictions, including the 1935 Ashurst-Sumners Act, severely curtailed the open sale of prison-made goods but an active states-use market where prison-made products were sold to other state agencies continued throughout the twentieth century and beyond.[14] Huey P. Newton described the prison manufacture of shoes and license plates and laundry services as "little more than slavery" by a captive work force enslaved by the state.[15]

As historian Robert Chase notes, prior to World War II the law considered prisoners as "slaves of the state, and courts at state and federal levels maintained a

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'hands-off' doctrine of non-intervention regarding the conditions of state captivity. The legal tradition that denied prisoners the ability to seek court-ordered intervention and relief has its origins in emancipation and the struggle over Reconstruction."[16] Recent scholarship on mass incarceration has placed the Thirteenth Amendment's exception clause at the center of the expansion of states' control over the lives and work of convicted persons.[17] And the 1871 Virginia Supreme Court decision *Ruffin v. Commonwealth* certainly ruled that persons convicted of felony offenses are "for the time being a slave of the State. . . . He is civiliter mortuus [civilly dead]; and his estate, if he has any, is administered like that of a dead man."[18] Many scholars make the compelling argument that the modern prison system took up where slavery and Jim Crow left off, yet mass incarceration also proliferated from diverse and multilayered ideological and practical genealogies.[19]

The contemporary prison-industrial complex, particularly its economic and business models, emerged directly from later twentieth-century legislation, which grew out of 1960s Great Society-era efforts by politicians, prison managers, and business leaders to "modernize prison industries by encouraging them to adopt free world business practices" as well as neo-liberalism.[20] The Justice System Improvement Act (1979) created the Prison Industry Enhancement (PIE) certification program, which permitted state corrections departments to form "partnerships" with private firms to create jobs for incarcerated workers. PIE regulations stipulate that these workers must be paid "local prevailing wages" or a fair wage within the context of the local economy and includes other protections. The National Correctional Industries Organization (NCIA) was contracted by the U.S. Bureau of Justice in 1995 to ensure all PIE program participants would comply. PIE also freed "certified" products made in prison factories from Depression-era federal regulations.[21]

Spurred by initiatives in the Texas prison system, the 1995 American Legislative Exchange Council (Alec) expanded the Prison Industries Act and ensured that private corporations could benefit from the rapidly rising prison population, and a huge captive workforce. There was significant political and corporate support for PIE and ALEC in the same decades that "first-world" neoliberal economic policies wreaked devastation on traditional blue-collar manufacturing areas and nonwhite working-class communities in particular.[22] But, in cruel irony, the burgeoning prison-industrial complex created jobs and wealth in many smaller towns and cities in which new prisons were built.[23] And amid shortages of qualified entry-level workers and manufacturing growth in 1990s Minnesota, some private companies started recruiting prisoners to plug the gaps in their free-world labor forces.[24]

Jaron Browne notes that by the mid-1990s labor conditions for the majority Black and Latino men and women in U.S. prisons were so similar to that of workers in the *maquiladoras* and sweatshops of the Global South that U.S. politicians were actively courting global brands. Oregon State Representative Kevin Mannix suggested that Nike move its production from Indonesia to Oregon prisons to take advantage of lower transportation and labor costs.[25]

There is significant political support behind the wide economic reach of the United States' billion-dollar prison-industrial complex but many aspects of prison labor and working conditions draw limited public and media scrutiny. Occasionally, the contemporary penal curtain is publicly lifted, particularly when

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prisoner work can be presented as heroic, selfless, and patriotic. Shortly before the start of the 2018 prison strike, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation tweeted, "Today, more than 2,000 volunteer inmate firefighters, including 58 youth offenders, are battling wildfire flames throughout CA. Inmate firefighters serve a vital role, clearing thick brush down to the bare soil to stop the fire's spread." Further reporting revealed that these imprisoned firefighters were only paid two dollars per day, plus one dollar per hour, for this grueling and dangerous work.[26] Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic expanded prison labor across the United States as state incarcerated populations were used "to manufacture protective equipment, wash potentially contaminated hospital laundry, disinfect cleaning supplies, and dig graves," often without access to hygiene products and basic medical care.[27] Women prisoners sewed protective masks at Las Colinas Women's Detention Facility at Santee, California.[28]

Michael Gibson-Light's ethnographic-criminological study of prisoner attitudes toward work details the tiered penal employment status hierarchy of a medium security unit in a men's state prison in a major Sunbelt state in the early twenty-first century. At the top, was the call center where around thirty prisoners made cold-call telemarketing sales to potential customers in the free world and another thirty prisoners produced street and other signs for private orders. These skilled positions required a high school diploma or equivalent. Call-center workers had to pass a computer test and a mock sales assessment, and had to have a particular (racially indistinct) voice tone. Wages were high, at around one dollar per hour, workers had regular smoking breaks, and fewer correctional officers were stationed in these workspaces. The middle tier included a small crew of four to seven men in the auto garage who performed regular maintenance on the institution's vast vehicular fleet. They held relatively skilled jobs with some degree of autonomy from correctional officer supervision, and earned more than their counterparts in the bottom tier. At the bottom, was the hated food factory where around eighty men rolled bologna, wrapped sandwiches, and engaged in a range of other mostly deskilled tasks for a few cents per hour, maintenance jobs such as cleaning floors and toilets, collecting cigarette butts and other trash across facility grounds, under constant correctional officer supervision and threat of sanctions. Other bottom-tier jobs included outside highway clean-up crews, performing hard dirty work but often away from the institution itself, although they had to pass through a strip shack at the beginning and end of each workday. The vast majority of prisoners worked in the middle and bottom tiers of the labor hierarchy with low wages, high labor turnover, and higher supervision. Those without jobs remained in the yard, which those in work often viewed as volatile and violent.[29]

Prison laborer hierarchies have a long history in the United States, and have long served the keepers and the prison regime by shoring up racial, gendered, nativist, and class divides. Privileged prisoners or "trusties" were rewarded with better rations, housing, and visiting times than the ordinary "gunmen" that they lorded over in many southern prisons. The contemporary prison hierarchies in Rikers Island as described by Ludwig offers a nuanced critique of the struggles by both convicted and free-world workers each to find dignity and worth through their labor.

Prisoner workers are not protected by minimum wage or overtime laws, and are explicitly barred from the right to organize and collectively bargain. In some states,

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incarcerated workers are paid and in others they are not—reinforcing charges that prisons are sites of modern-day slavery. According to the International Labor Organization, between 2000 and 2011, wages in United States' correctional facilities ranged from $0.23 to $1.15 per hour for federal prisoners. California prison laborers earned between $0.30 and $0.95 per hour before deductions.[30] Arizona prisoners with jobs inside a correctional institution were paid between $0.10 and $0.50 per hour while those employed by one of the Arizona Department of Correction's private partners could expect more than $0.50 an hour, at a time when the U.S. minimum wage was $7.25.[31]

In an expose of female prison labor for Martori Farms, a leading supplier of agricultural produce for Walmart, and a private company partnered with the at Arizona's state prison Perryville unit, one prisoner described her working day in 2012: "They wake us up between 2.30 and 3am and kick us out of our housing unit by 3.30am. We get fed at 4am. Our work supervisors show up between 5am and 8am. Then it's an hour to a one-and-a-half-hour drive to the job site. Then we work eight hours, regardless of conditions. . . . We work in the fields hoeing weeds and thinning plants. . . . " She continued, "Currently, we are forced to work in the blazing sun for eight hours. We run out of water several times a day. We ran out of sunscreen several times a week. They don't check medical backgrounds or ages before they pull women for these jobs. Many of us cannot do it! If we stop working and sit on the bus of even just take an unauthorized break, we get a major ticket which takes away our 'good time.'[32]A Martori spokesman defended the program, saying it gives "inmates an opportunity to increase their skills, improves their chances of getting work upon release, puts some money in their pockets and is a resume enhancer." He acknowledged there had been problems with prisoner welfare but passed on the disciplinary complaints, which he deemed a correctional issue. Prison workers were reportedly supervised by a correctional officer and a Farms manager.[33] This example also underlines the uneasy relationship between prison control, discipline, and punishment and corporate labor control and management.

Despite legal prohibitions and disciplinary sanctions, prisoner organizing continues, as highlighted by the 2018 national prison strike, the 2016 national prison strike, and a major 2013 prisoner hunger strike in California involving nearly thirty thousand prisoners in 2013. In August 2018, prisoners in seventeen states organized a major prison strike in which participants called for "an immediate end to prison slavery" and demanded that "[a]ll persons imprisoned in any place of detention . . . be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor."[34]

Historically, many prisoners and forced laborers have continually resisted degrading, oppressive, and exploitative conditions of work and confinement. As the articles by Garrett-Scott and Rech demonstrate, the ability to resist and protest were severely circumscribed by poverty, violence, and a predatory criminal legal system while Ludwig's article further underlines why the fight for better conditions, humanization of the carceral workplace, and dignity of work and labor remains so important.

Notes

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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3. "Sweating for fashion: Labour comes cheap, and will get cheaper still," *The Economist* 370 (March 6, 2004): 138–39.
4. Sean Sellers and Greg Asbed, "The History and Evolution of Forced Labor in Florida Agriculture," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global* Contexts 5 (2011): 38.
5. Prison populations across the world have fluctuated during the COVID-19 pandemic (from early 2020 onward), and differing methods of calculation give different population headcounts, so these figures are indicative, but were sourced from "Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Total," *World Prison Brief*, December 2021, www.prisonstudies.org [last accessed: July 22, 2022]. In addition, the most recent U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics show that from 2010 to 2020, the nation's correctional population decreased 22.4 percent (down to 1,588,400 persons). The United States' community supervision and incarcerated populations declined steadily until 2019 when there was a sharp drop in both. Evaluations of the impacts of COVID and post-pandemic trends are, of course, ongoing. See Rick Kluckow and Zhen Zeng, "Correctional Populations in the United States, 2020 – Statistical Tables," (2022) 1. NCJ 303184. Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus20st.pdf [retrieved June 1, 2022].
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13. See also Haley, *No Mercy Here* and Vivien M. L. Miller, *Hard Labor and Hard Time: Florida's "Sunshine Prison" and Chain Gangs* (Gainesville, FL, 2012) for analysis of similar female carceral experiences in early-twentieth-century Georgia and Florida.

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15. Quoted in Daryl Michael Scott, "The Social and Intellectual Origins of 13thism," *Fire!!!* 5 (2020): 27.

16. Robert T. Chase, "We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 102 (2015): 77.

17. Scott, "The Social and Intellectual Origins of 13thism," 2–39. The exception clause is in italics: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,* shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

18. *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, 21 Grat. 790 (Virginia, 1871) quoted in Chase, 77.

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25. Quoted in Jaron Browne, "Rooted in Slavery," 42.

26. Quoted in Keith Armstrong, "'You May Be Down And Out, But You Ain't Beaten': Collective Bargaining for Incarcerated Workers," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 110 (2020): 597. For

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29. Gibson-Light, "Sandpiles of Dignity, 199.

30. See "Prison Laborers: What Kind of Labor do They do? US Marshals Service,"ß 2022, hcsdmass.org/prison-laborers [last access July 23, 2022].

31. Walshe, "How US prison labour pads corporate profits at taxpayers' expense."

32. Testimony is quoted in Walshe, "How US prison labour pads corporate profits at taxpayers' expense."

33. Ibid.

34. Armstrong, "'You May Be Down And Out, But You Ain't Beaten," 595, 609.

Cite this article: LeFlouria TL, Miller VML (2022). Introduction. *International Labor and Working-Class History* **101**, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000126

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