

# USA: prison strike expands nationwide

Saturday 22 September 2018, by [LOOMIS Erik](#) (Date first published: 30 August 2018).

**A national strike by prisoners is the latest iteration of demands for freedom from forced labor.**

Since Aug. 21, prisoners across the United States have been on one of the largest prison strikes the nation has seen in years. They have several demands, but at the top is the end of the forced labor the state coerces out of them. Up to 800,000 prisoners a day are put out for work without their choice, usually for [extremely paltry compensation](#) that in Louisiana is as low as 4 cents per hour.

With often privatized prisons operating with maximum security and limited communication among prisoners, even discovering what is happening remains difficult, yet prisoners have organized themselves nonetheless in one of the most important labor actions in this country.

The prison strike is a multiracial action, but that African-Americans make up a disproportionate number of the nation's prison population and its leadership of this movement is no accident. This strike is part of centuries' worth of labor actions to protest the compelled labor out of black bodies by a white-dominated society. We should not see the prison strike as an isolated event. It is instead the latest iteration of demands for freedom from forced labor that go back to slavery.

From the beginning of black chattel slavery in what became the United States, African-American workers have sought to take control over their lives and work. Sometimes this was through slave revolts such as Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 Virginia. But more common was individual acts of resistance — running away, slowing down in the fields, stealing food from the master.

During the Civil War, slaves freed themselves by walking to Union lines. What was a trickle in 1861 became a flood by 1864, as thousands of self-emancipated slaves followed Union soldiers. What the pioneering civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois called the "general strike" of slaves changed the outcome of the war, forcing a reluctant Lincoln administration to move toward the Emancipation Proclamation and then the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, all while slowing the Confederate war effort by undermining the labor force and thus the economy. Slaves could not have won the war by themselves, but their actions were crucial in deciding the war and creating its moral impact.

The Civil War may have ended chattel slavery, but the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment had a fatal flaw, allowing for an [exception from free labor for the incarcerated](#). Almost immediately, states, especially in the South, used this to control black labor. They began rounding up ex-slaves after the war, passing vagrancy laws that allowed the state to sell their labor. Congressional interference during Reconstruction briefly limited this practice, but by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, white rule created a huge economic sector based upon unfree black labor, especially in the prison chain gangs at institutions such as Mississippi's notorious Parchman Farm, symbol of the Jim Crow era's murderous regime against black people, as well as in contract labor, where private employers worked black prisoners into the grave. Increasingly, prison authorities compelled labor out of nonblack prisoners as well.

The civil rights movement challenged this prison regime, but by no means ended it. In Texas during the 1970s, segregated prison gangs worked under overseers picking cotton for no money. This was

modern slavery. In 1978, 1,500 inmates at the Canfield Prison in Ellis, Tex., refused to work in support of a lawsuit (in part against unpaid prison labor) started by a civil rights activist imprisoned in 1972 for inciting a riot during a protest against a white-owned store. They started a prison strike, which spread through the state's prison system, gained nationwide attention and lasted for two weeks.

As during the current prison strike, the Texas prisoners had few illusions of immediate victories. But in 1980, the Texas prison labor system was ruled unconstitutional, and no longer would they pick cotton under overseers for no money. This was one victory in a centuries-long struggle; yet Texas has continued to exploit its prisoners for poorly paid work.

Just as the public attention of the 1978 strike contributed to that 1980 decision, so might the current prison strike create changes to the current system of prison labor exploitation. That can happen if we make changes to prison labor systems a central demand of our politicians. The strike will continue until Sept. 9, and it is up to us on the outside to make our voices heard in support of these workers.

Too often, we treat prisoners as outcasts instead of fellow workers. Not only are they stripped of their constitutional rights, but even labor activists do not take their needs seriously as workers. Ending prison labor exploitation — what strike organizers call “[prison slavery](#)” — should be at the top of the agenda for the American labor movement, as it is the defining feature of work for the lives of huge swaths of the American working class.

Slavery still has never ended in the United States. It continues every day in our prisons. We must wash ourselves of this moral stain on our society and treat prisoners with the human rights that every person deserves.

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**P.S.**

The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/30/opinion/national-prison-strike-slavery-.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

Old Title:

'Serving Time Should Not Mean 'Prison Slavery'