

DIALOGUE AT ICOPA 13

Projects to Prisons: The Modern Day Plantations *Chas Ransome*

From 1993 to 2001, Andrew Cuomo, Clinton's White House Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Urban Development (HUD), authorized his father Mario Cuomo, then Governor of New York State to use HUD funds to build more prisons instead of low-income housing for the poor (The City Project, 2000). This was a major indicator on a federal level that the idea prisons were profitable and minorities from low-income neighbourhoods of inner cities would fill these prisons. Politicians, correctional facilities, unions, and business corporations bought into the idea of "prisons for profit" in the United States.

Yet, no rural community wanted prisons in their backyard. While communities rallied against prisons, government leaders executed plans to convince these communities to cash in on the boom of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) in America, regardless of the human cost (Schlosser, 1998). Once convinced, upstate communities – that acquiesced – thought themselves to be justified. In their minds, because commercial businesses like Alcoa and General Motors were closed and / or moving on, opting for the PIC was a good move that lifted the North Country out of dire circumstances. As a result, North Country legislators and residents used this excuse to welcome a few modern day plantations to sustain their economies (ibid). As advocated in a statement by Mayor Henry Rausch, he encouraged his constituents to politick for more prisons or to increase the size of current correctional facilities in the Village of Coxsackie in New York (Huling, 1998). It was these rural and mostly white communities in the North Country that rationalized its justification to have these modern day plantations in their communities as being "pure common sense economics". It is no surprise that this distorted thinking continues to be articulated today.

In a 14 February 2010, article in *The Advance News* – the St. Lawrence County's Sunday newspaper – the Executive Director of the St. Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce Patricia McKeown (2010) wrote in support of this twisted rhetoric in stating "Struggling North Country Seeking [recession proof jobs] jumped at the opportunity to bring a prison or two to their towns." They sent their sons and daughters downstate for training and fended off

critics for the sake of the jobs”. McKeown went on to say that “[s]oon, 13 state-run incarceration facilities, with their all-male inmate populations and their gated exterior, sprang up across the northern tier, bringing with them great-paying state jobs and sweet benefit packages” (ibid).

After reading those comments, it seems that the business of “prisons for profit” was great while it lasted, yet it is clearly proven that prisons are not the sustainable economic development needed in the North Country. To prove this, we need look no further than Governor Paterson’s Executive Fiscal Budget Report outlining the necessity to close those prisons operating under capacity (Office of New York State Governor, 2010). The Executive Budget, now under review by New York State legislators, allocated \$2.68 billion for operating expenses and \$320 million for capital expenditures to the Department of Correctional Services for the fiscal year that took effect 1 April 2010. The sum reflects an 8.6 percent budget reduction or a \$283 million dollar decrease from 2009-2010. The closures would save \$3 million in 2010-2011 and \$45.8 million annually when fully effective, plus another \$13.8 million in avoided capital costs over the next five years. These are funds that could have originally gone towards better schools, libraries, treatment programs, re-entry services for ex-offenders and families in under served low-income communities (New York State Department of Correctional Services, 2010).

Now, some 20 years later, as New York State is faced with a budget deficit of more than \$14 billion dollars for the fiscal year 2010 alone, current Governor David A Paterson and State legislators have to do something to close this enormous gap (Office of New York State Governor, 2010). A realistic proposal presented for approval is to reverse the trend of “prisons for profits” by closing 10 to 12 medium security and four maximum security prisons, all in the Northern Country. It just makes fiscal sense (see New York State Department of Correctional Services, 2009). There is opposition to these plans, however.

McKeown (2010) further claims “[t]hat the loss of 287 professional jobs, at Ogdensburg medium state prison, and even more related service and business contracts would mean that families would have to make do with old cars and trucks. It would mean no new school clothes or winter coats. It means no snow blowers or snowmobiles. It would mean late house and utility payments, as well as fewer groceries. And forget college tuition, health insurance, dinners out or flowers on Valentine’s Day”.

It is shameful that this conversation is one-sided in the North Country media. Equally shameful is that, only one article written by residents or

representatives in the Northern New York State area mentions “prisoners are people” with humanistic or redemptive value. We are most often seen as modern day slaves – a commodity. Yet, in a separate article – same paper, same date – Robert Gangi, the Executive Director of the Corrections Association of New York – a New York City based State agency vested with complete legislative authority to investigate prison conditions – makes a profound point by stating: “[w]arehousing human beings is not economic development!” (The Advance News, 2010). With that in mind, we should realize that this decision to close prisons was not brought on by a crisis of conscience or morality, but rather, something more disastrous – a huge deficit.

In an attempt to be objective, let us look at all the factors. According to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (2009), crime is down nationwide. With the crime rate down in NYS, less people are convicted and sent to prison. In addition, and even more interesting, are recent statistics noting that 399 A-1 violent prisoners, the top category, were released between 2005 and 2007. The statistics show that of the 399 that 385 prisoners were incarcerated for murder and attempted murder. To date, “NOT ONE” of the 399 A-1 ex-prisoners released returned to prison. That means *no* bodies to fill the 10 to 12 medium or the four maximum prisons mentioned above. If these prisons cannot function at capacity, they should be closed. It is common sense.

Closing 10 to 12 medium security prisons or four maximum-security prisons could save New York State \$89.5 million annually. Had this been done 20 years ago, well over a billion dollars could have been allocated to fund programs, to provide jobs and housing, to address the needs of low-income communities and those affected by prison, instead of wasted funds spent warehousing human beings for a phantom profit., Especially, since these same individuals (some) will have to one day return to low-income communities that are dysfunctional and completely disenfranchised. Since money will not be available, North Country representatives – Democrat and Republican – together will have to earn their keep. They will have to think of new ways to entice commercial business back to the region with economic development projects focused on long-term sustainable growth! And, they will have to get started real soon.

The lesson that should be learned from the elimination of those alleged recession proof prison jobs is that it does not pay to profit off the pain, misery and circumstances of others. Especially, when *your life* and the *lives of your children* depend on it.

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