An Insider's Perspective on Canadian Prison Labour: An Interview

Gregory McMaster and Jordan House

Gregory McMaster has spent over four decades incarcerated in the United States and Canada and is currently a federal prisoner in a medium security institution in Ontario. This interview was conducted by Jordan House and occurred on 29 February 2020. It has been condensed and edited for clarity. The conversation touches on jobs and work programs in Canadian federal prisons, similarities and differences between US and Canadian prison labour, and changes to Canadian prison labour programs over time, especially in relation to pay cuts instituted by the Conservative government headed by Stephen Harper.

Jordan House (JH): Hi Greg, thanks for doing this. Could we start by getting you to introduce yourself?

Gregory McMaster (GM): My name is Greg McMaster. I'm 63 years old. I've been continuously incarcerated for the last 42 years.[1] I'm a US citizen and the first 15 years of my incarceration started in the United States when I was 21. I was eventually extradited to Canada in 1993 for crimes I had committed in Canada in 1978 along with my US conviction – the result of a cross border crime spree of sorts. At the ripe old age of 21, I was responsible for the deaths of four young men. One of them was a police officer.

JH: Since you've done so much time, could you start by talking about some of the jobs that you've had while in prison?

GM: I've held a wide variety of jobs while incarcerated – some menial jobs, such as sweeping the floor, or working in the kitchen of the institution washing dishes and that sort of stuff – all the way up to being the Inmate Committee chairman, which is an elected position, or being the chairman of the now-defunct event at Collins Bay Penitentiary known as the Exceptional Peoples Olympiad, where we were in charge of up to 150 physically and mentally challenged athletes who would come into the institution for a weekend for an Olympic-style event. So, I've run the whole gambit of prison

labour. From factory work to sweeping the floors to executive positions to jobs that gave me access to the outside world and business leaders to help raise funds for events such as the Exceptional Peoples Olympiad or educating the public through CBC radio specials or CBC documentaries on the *Doc Zone*. From the most minimal labour to the most extreme that you can imagine, I've pretty much done it all.

JH: Are you working now?

GM: I am. I have what some would consider a menial job. I'm actually in the process of recovering from major heart surgery. Last August I had an aortic valve transplant and a triple by-pass, so – I wouldn't call it a sluff job – but I'm working in the gym and I'm in charge of what they call the equipment cage. I do anything that needs to be done down there with the staff, like setting up for events or concerts in the gym and speakers and that sort of stuff – waxing the gym floor on occasion.

JH: Given those wide varieties of jobs, and maybe this is obvious, but is there a kind of general consensus around what kind of jobs are better and which ones are worse?

GM: I gave that some thought and a lot of that depends on your personal preferences and what your likes and dislikes are. Some guys want to sweep a floor because they don't want to get involved in anything. Other guys want the challenge of having a position of trust and there's probably three or four offices within the institution that prisoners are responsible for, like the Inmate Committee or the Lifer's Group office. And so, it depends. It depends on what the level of responsibility you want. If you want you can go work in the factory, if you want to do something productive. If you want to work with food, you go directly towards kitchen. Some guys want to go work in a library and some guys work in what we call the Works Department, which would be the plumbing and the carpentry – the basics that keep the penitentiary running. So, there's a wide variety of positions. Right now, snow removal is a big thing because we're at the end of winter and just had a good storm. From a practical point of view, prisoners pretty much keep the physical aspect of the penitentiary running.

To the average citizen it's a wide variety of employment opportunities – so I have my personal preferences, other people would have their preferences. I choose to use my brain whenever possible with some of the positions I've had. But right now, I've shut everything down and I'm just focusing on the recovery after the heart surgery. That's why I'm where I'm at now.

JH: Could you talk a bit about how job assignments are allocated?

GM: Each institution is different. Although CSC would claim there is, there's no set agenda across the country. At this particular institution, they'll post a job on our internal television station, or they'll put up paperwork for it. Or it's just word of mouth and the work supervisor will tell a trusted employee, "Get me somebody good here". And they'll get a friend of theirs who wants a job or a new guy that needs a job. It's pretty informal. They have a formal process for it, but it's kind of – for lack of a better term – it's kind of a joke. It's more who do you know versus what you know – like the free world!

JH: Jobs are also divided into CORCAN (the Canadian federal prison industry program) and non-CORCAN jobs. Could you talk about the difference between CORCAN and non-CORCAN work?

GM: I used to be a CORCAN worker. I used to be a faithful believer in it – because of the paycheques. When I was in Collins Bay Institution, at the time it was a high medium security institution, in the Kingston area, I worked in the wood shop, basically a furniture factory. We made all the furniture for this institution. Anything that had to do with wood, we made it. And back then they had the farms running, which Harper later shut down.

At that time, one institution provided the milk, and another institution would make the bread, and another institution provided the eggs. And they worked it out all on paper, all the money was exchanged on paper between institutions. So, they didn't have to go shopping for these kinds of necessities to feed the hundreds and hundreds of men in each institution. And that was CORCAN to some degree, and then you get into actual factories and, like I said, I worked in a furniture factory. And I could pull in $400 every two weeks, which is a decent paycheque considering that you're incarcerated.

When you're making money inside the penitentiary, you can save a little bit to help with your family – help buy the kids winter boots, or the Christmas presents, or the birthday presents, or help if the car has a flat tire – you know, normal family stuff that actually costs money. Earning a decent paycheque with CORCAN at the time allowed us the opportunity to be productive, to show our family that we're being responsible, to show the prison administrators and the keepers that keep an eye on us that we're being productive, we're being pro-social, and we're doing the right thing and we're taking that money and sending it home. And we're not buying drugs with it or buying anything just for fluff or something – we're making good money to help support our families, and to keep the family unit together for our reintegration process upon our release. Because having a strong family unit is, in fact, the most productive aspect of reintegration, and that's been proven for decades and decades, that a strong family unit is the best tool to make sure you don't go back to prison. But once again, the Harper government removed that too and took away our ability to earn a decent wage. And it just crushed us, it really crushed us, as far as helping out went along. We could no longer make choices because of the pay cuts. There's nothing we can go without anymore because we're going without everything anyway. There's no choice, I'll go without this this week, I'll go without this this month – you're just going without everything. Helping your family became a thing of the past.

JH: I want to talk more about pay, but maybe before we do, could you speak a little bit more about CORCAN? Working in a furniture shop doesn't necessarily sound like the most interesting work in the world but did you gain any skills doing that kind of job? Were there incentives besides the pay? Or was there anything else attractive about CORCAN work?

GM: I can't speak across the board to this. I've been in eight different institutions throughout my 42 years so I can't claim to have been in every penitentiary to see what's actually going on, or the footprint of that particular institution.

JH: Of course.

GM: Personally, in my 42 years of incarceration, the only place I ever learned a skill set was when I ran the Exceptional Peoples Olympiad as the Chairman. I learned people skills, office skills, communication skills, and business skills, dealing with the outside agencies and dealing with the centres where the athletes are living and that sort of thing. And by fundraising with the local businesses – everything around this wonderful event.

As far as the CORCAN labour went, it's just basically what we would call slave labour – I guess that is the most more common terminology for it. It's 1940's, 1950's technology where the equipment and everything's outdated. There's nothing really new or happening and the only way there would be is if they could figure out a way to make money off of us from it. You're paying for your own incarceration via CORCAN work. And right now, I would say that they would have to force me to go back to CORCAN. And they couldn't even do that because I would tell them what they could do with that notion. You're not going to learn anything there. There are guys in there working. Well, yeah, but guess what? He's not going to move to India and get a job on a sewing machine. There's guys that might be using 1960s equipment to assemble furniture. Well, there's no shop on the street doing that anymore. There's just nothing, regardless of what the CORCAN promotional material may say.

I think somewhere in the past they had good intentions with CORCAN but that kind of slipped by the wayside, and they started seeing us as they did in the States – where they view prisoners as a reusable commodity. That's where the whole privatization aspect of it came in – where you have a private workforce that you don't have to pay insurance or vacation time, and the overhead is all provided by the government. You bring your little factory in here and just have us working for you for pennies an hour. So, what it was intended to be and what it evolved into are two separate animals.

JH: The use of the word slavery there is obviously interesting. We've seen lots of controversy recently, especially in the US, about prison labour as slavery. Could you talk a bit about some of the consequences of not working besides not getting a paycheque?

GM: Well, I've had the – I wouldn't say benefit of – but I've had the experience of working in prison industries in both countries. When I was

serving time in the state of Minnesota, they had a program where they had a factory in whatever housing unit you lived in. The factory was right above your head in the living unit. That's where you worked. And let's say it was a glue line and we're making file folders. A couple of guys are cutting them, other guys are sorting them, and you're sitting on the assembly line, gluing these things together. That's what you do all day long. Nothing else, just sit there and glue these things. And that's basically your life. You're getting 11 cents an hour starting pay and top pay was 23 cents an hour. And if you refuse to do this – and this is the slave labour aspect – if you refuse to work, you were then punished, put in segregation for 10 days. Then you're moved to the non-working unit where you're locked up except for two hours a day – it's basically also segregation time. You only get access to a little bit of phone time, and a little bit of sunshine. You're locked up for all but two hours a day for a minimum of two months, to teach you a lesson that you will go to work for us.

Plus, if you don't work, you lose 'good time' – and this is really where slavery comes in. So, let's say you have a nine-year sentence. If you agree to work and you don't get other charges like fighting or drugs or something of that nature, you're only going to do two thirds of your sentence. So, you're going to be released in six years. If you refuse the work, you're doing every day at nine years. So that's three years of your life. You could be home with your family, your children, earning an income, taking care of family business, and moving on with your life and putting this nightmare behind you. So that's where the slave labor comes in. Not only are you getting paid literally pennies per hour, the incentive is we're going to keep you locked up in this dungeon until you comply with our wishes for you.

JH: Are there similar punitive responses for refusing to work in Canada?

GM: If there's a slow turnout for CORCAN industry here, or if they bring in a new program and expand, they put out the notice for workers and within two to four weeks, if they don't get the amount of workers they're looking for, men will start getting called to see their parole officers for a meeting. And they're told in no uncertain terms, you're going to go work at CORCAN and if you refuse to go work at CORCAN, I'm not going to support you for transfer to minimum security. There will be no support for parole, temporary absences or the private family visiting program. The

work board has determined that CORCAN is part of your correctional plan, and you are refusing to comply with your correctional plan. They hold a sledgehammer over your head because they control your life. In my opinion, that approach is highly unethical, but that's what Canadian tax dollars are paying for.

JH: And I assume that it's very common for people to agree to work in CORCAN as part of their correctional plans, is that true?

GM: Once again, it depends on the individual, and it depends on his lifestyle, and it depends on his mindset. Am I allowed to use swear words?

JH: Sure.

GM: A lot of guys will tell them to go fuck themselves. Other guys buy into it. Other guys are sheepish. You have a certain class of prisoner that wants to stay under the radar and not draw attention to themselves for whatever reasons. Usually, for their type of conviction. And they do exactly what they're told to do, and they comply with the machine, and you never hear a peep out of them. And there's other guys who are quite vocal and pound their chest and tell them to go to hell. We have the whole gambit. It runs from one extreme to the other.

JH: Let's talk about pay.

GM: What pay? [Laughs]

JH: Well, exactly. Before 2013, maximum pay for federal prisoners was $6.90 a day. Then the Harper government instituted something called the Offender Accountability Initiative, which reduced pay by a third. Can you speak to that?

GM: We were having a hard time as it was because they already did away with CORCAN incentive pay. I forget what year it was, but they did away with our ability to earn those $400 CORCAN paycheques every two weeks that I was telling you about earlier. Someone on the street was screaming bloody murder about prisoners making too much money or something of that

nature. And so, what they did was, if you're working at CORCAN instead of getting your regular, what we call joint pay, that's your hourly rate, you would also get piecework – incentive work. You're producing all these special orders, banging out 1,000 chairs, that sort of stuff within the shop of 10 guys and you're in it to win it. You're in it and you got a good crew of guys there working together, you're mostly all family men and you know, hey, we're a team and let's take care of our families. And that's the kind of shop the foreman wants. Those are the kind of guys the foreman wants working for him. Responsible characters in there for the right reasons. It's not so much that they have pride in their work, but they have pride in their family and that they're helping to sustain that family. But they eliminated that incentive pay.

JH: The Office of the Correctional Investigator has said that take home pay can now be "as little as 40 cents an hour".[2] Could you talk a bit more about some of the consequences of the pay cuts?

GM: Well, we actually do get paid pennies. But we get charged real world dollars for everything we purchase. I don't care if it's a bottle of water at the canteen, chewing gum, a candy bar, or a magazine to read. Anything and everything. We're getting charged real world dollars but also actually a 10% markup for the inmate welfare committee. That's how they raise money here. When we purchase something at the canteen it's street prices plus 10%. And you're making, like you said, 40 cents an hour. It doesn't add up at the end of the day and you're damn sure not saving any money to help your family. You're struggling to get by, just to buy deodorant and shampoo and helping your family for gas money to come visit you, or for Christmas presents for the kids – it's just dumb. It crushed us.

But the point I was trying to make before is that, prior to those cuts they had already cut off our CORCAN incentive pay – those $400 cheques. CORCAN workers were then limited, so let's say if you could earn $6.90 a day working at CORCAN, you were then allowed to make double that, so you were allowed to make two pays instead of one if you were there like a little slave every single day. But you were capped at double pay, which for me personally wasn't enough to encourage me to go back to CORCAN once they did those pay cuts.

So, when Harper came along with Vic Toews, who was the Public Safety Minister at the time, and announced these cuts, they were just generating

thirty second sound bites for their reelection campaign without any care or consideration for the real effects on human lives that was taking place, and the families they were affecting, the young children they were affecting.

It's good publicity to bash prisoners, particularly around election time to generate fear within the public. And we became a whipping boy yet again, the whole system, men and women, because the women are suffering right along with us. And it was devastating. These last cuts were just too much and some of us just gave up. Some guys turned to drugs and said screw it. And they unfortunately – I wouldn't say CSC *forced* guys back into the prison subculture – but a lot of guys just gave up and sank back into the prison subculture. There is a fine line between proactive, pro-social and negativity in here and it's pretty slippery sometimes and before you know you're in the subculture and you don't know how you got there, and you're doing things to make ends meet and that was never your intention. You're trying to do the right thing and you just can't, and that's the end result of the pay cuts.

JH: In response to the pay cuts, there was at least a couple lawsuits and a strike.

GM: I ended up doing some CBC Radio spots on it because I have a history of engaging with the media about prisoners' rights and that sort of stuff. And I was contacted on that and basically I was just trying to educate the public on the realities of what was taking place and I started getting all this mail from different prisons across the country from prisoners who had listened to it and for some reason they thought the institution where I was served as strike central or something because they heard my voice on the radio. I had to write them all as the Inmate Committee chairman of this institution and say you're confused about what that was about, that was an educational tool, not giving directions on what to do during a strike.

The strike was doomed to fail – because they own you. They're in charge of where you sleep, where you eat, they just lock you up and, if you don't want to work, get in your cell. And that gets old pretty quick. I heard that some of the women's institutions were rock hard, rock solid, and they held on longer than the men, I was impressed. But this institution lasted a whole week, and, like I said, I was the Inmate Committee chair at that time so, although everyone's on strike, my job as an elected official was to be an intermediary between the administration and the population, and it was a

really fine line to walk during that kind of tension. When these edicts come down the warden's hands are tied, he is just given a direction and he's going to follow said direction because it came from his boss. And it comes from a much higher level than that – the commissioner gets his marching orders from the ministers and the Prime Minister. It is what it is.

JH: It's probably worth noting that the lawsuits that challenged the pay cuts also failed.

GM: We had high hopes for that. I don't know how we lost that one. I was involved in that as well. I did the affidavit for this particular institution as the Inmate Committee chair, and we did have very high hopes for that. Because the cuts were based on room and board, that was their excuse that we should be paying room and board, what they failed to tell the public and what they lied about when they presented to the courts, was that we were already paying room and board. When our pay scale was enacted, I believe it was in 1982, the $6.90 a day that we were getting paid is what was left over after they did all their mathematical calculations. After they took out room and board, that left us $6.90 per day to work with. They double dipped and got room and board from us twice. We already had leftover scraps, and they went after a piece of that for those little thirty second sound bites to make it look like they're getting tough on crime.

JH: I'm wondering if we could zoom back out again and talk about other issues besides pay, compensation and high cost of living. Are there major issues of health and safety or other kinds of things that people should know about?

GM: Well, if you look around any prison population in the country, you are going to notice what I would consider an abnormal amount of missing fingers and partial fingers. As I mentioned, there's antiquated equipment in the industry program, and you don't have properly rated breathing masks or apparatus for some of the work you're doing with the dust flying around. Or you're in a wood shop or in a metal shop, you're welding that sort of stuff, inhaling the fumes. There's been plenty of times over the years where I had to put my foot down and say, "I'm not doing that and endangering my health". And if I refuse to do that, they'll find someone else who will do it.

They do have these little panels, and I've sat on a few of them, where they discuss health and safety, but it's all just something that gets handed down from on high from Ottawa. Institutions have to enact something in, say, six months, and they have meetings, they have lectures, they have educational seminars, and then it just gets filed away with everything else and it's status quo.

JH: What happens if someone gets injured at work and can't work anymore? Are they compensated or can they get normal workers' compensation?

GM: No, you can't get normal workers' compensation from the street because you aren't making street wages. It's all institutional pay – you get bumped down to $2.50 a day, which is medical pay, unemployment pay, and that sort of stuff. There's what's called level A, B, C and D pay. Most guys started out at level C, and you can go as high as level A, but the $2.50 a day is the unemployment and medical pay.

And I know that out of that, they take our cable bill because we pay for our own cable on television in here (it's a very limited package and there's nothing spectacular). But they take either $8.00 or $9.00 per man every two weeks prior to you even seeing it. And so, for unemployment pay, I think what you're left with is $12.50 for every two weeks, and that doesn't give you very much buying power when you're paying street prices for everything that you're buying. That's nothing really.

JH: Given what you've seen in relation to prison labour over the past few decades, what do you think the future of Canadian prison labour is? Where do you think things are headed?

GM: I think that that depends on what political party is in charge. The Liberals seem to have a much better grasp of rehabilitation, reintegration, and what's necessary to get us there. We've had a rather progressive government and we had a rather progressive commissioner named Ole Ingstrup in the 90s, and before that, and he had visions, and they were good visions, at least in my opinion, and you could earn a decent pay and you could help your family and you had meaningful employment.

The Conservatives took over and basically did away with three quarters of the beneficial programming and employment, and wanted strictly

punishment. All they want to do is punish and hammer you down and give you less pay. They cut the medical budgets at the institutions that were already overcrowded and understaffed. In this institution they added another 98 bodies in a new cellblock that they opened up a couple years ago and they cut two nurses at the same time. There's no rhyme or reason to what they do – it's the almighty dollar. Had Harper and the Conservatives been reelected, I'd probably be in a privately owned prison right now. Thank God he didn't get reelected. You would have seen me at the front line arguing and fighting against that as well. There's a whole different story line there on that one. It's massive corruption and the Canadian public needs to pay attention to that.

JH: Is there anything else you think people should know about prison labour or Canadian prisons?

GM: I would just like to assist in shattering some stereotypes. We're not all bad guys. Some of us made mistakes. I clearly did when I was young. But 41 years later, to beat me like a horse? The lessons were learned, let's move on to something that's productive. I see these young kids coming in and there's not much hope in here. Then you see them catching diseases, doing drugs and whatnot. And there are fentanyl overdoses and there's despair. Let a man earn a decent wage so he can feel proud of himself, so he can feel like a man. Let him learn something productive so when he re-enters society, he has something.

The key to all of this is that corrections chases the dollar. For ten to twenty years the cycle is programs – they just pump the programs at us. Well, that's good. So Johnny could take care of his drinking problem, his drug problem, his spousal abuse problem, maybe he's a sex offender, whatever it may be. There's a program – they're chasing that program dollar. That's what the government's giving out. But they're not teaching us any trade skills that we can walk out and earn a decent living with. So, Johnny's back on the street, he's not beating his wife, he's not abusing drugs, but he can't earn a decent income. So of course, he ends up back in the subculture and doing drugs.

Now flip that coin over. Now the government decides we're going to fund employment and certificates like plumbing and carpentry programs, and they forget about the programs that deal with your psychological and emotional issues. And your spousal abuse programs, for example, they take

the backseat. Now they're listening to our screams about employable skills, and they put all their money into that. And that's a great thing. Now, I can go out and earn a decent paycheque, I have my plumbing ticket, I can get a good job. But you didn't help me deal with my drinking problem. You didn't help me deal with my drug problem. And I'm still beating my wife.

Where am I going to end up? Back in prison again. They have to look at us as a whole entity, and deal with everything from employment, to the psychological, to the personal, to the financial – the full spectrum. Treat us like a human being and not as a reusable commodity, and your recidivism will drop by 80%. But they're all just chasing dollars on a spreadsheet: how can I save money? Who can I get a kickback from? Where's my bonus at the end of the year if I cut this out of the prisoner budget? And every time, and this is important, every time you hear about corrections having a budget cut, guess what? They're not cutting back on staff, they're not cutting back on their new uniforms every year or two. They're not cutting back on weapons, or the shiny razor blades in the fence. They're cutting back prisoner services, whether it's clothing, food, programming, healthcare, whatever it might be. That's where the budget cuts land every single time. The warden is not taking a pay cut – I guarantee you that.

ENDNOTES

[1] As of August 2020.

[2] Office of the Correctional Investigator (2014) *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2013-2014*, Ottawa, page 9.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gregory McMaster is an award-winning writer, prisoner rights activist, and current federal prisoner. His writing can be found in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* and elsewhere. His work can be located on the CBC Radio and Television websites.

Jordan House teaches in the Department of Labour Studies at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario.