
Interview: Joe Towns, Jr.

The criminal justice system is a mockery

State Rep. Joe Towns, Jr. (D-Memphis) has been a leader in opposing the use of private prisons in Tennessee, which is home to Corrections Corp. of America (CCA), the nation's leading private prison company. Representative Towns was interviewed by Marianna Wertz on July 1.



EIR: I understand that, though you helped lead a fight to defeat CCA's attempt last year to take over the Tennessee prison system, they are again trying to get the state legislature to give them the go-ahead.

Towns: There have been undertones and rumblings relative to it. What I have surmised is that the fight is not dead. When we heard that former Gov. R. Clayton McWhorter (D) was on the CCA board, that also signalled that the fight for the privatization of the Tennessee penal system wasn't over.

EIR: Former Gov. Lamar Alexander (R) is also a key supporter of CCA. Is CCA actively lobbying the legislature now?

Towns: The legislature is out now, so I would think that proponents of CCA would be lobbying the key people they thought could effect the change they were interested in.

EIR: Are you aware that CCA was recently defeated in Washington, D.C. in its attempt to get a private prison?

Towns: They've been defeated in quite a few places. They're having problems all over the country, because people are escaping, people are getting hurt while under their care, and buildings are not being maintained adequately.

EIR: One of the reasons it was rejected is that it is being sued by its stockholders for a stock swindle.

Towns: That doesn't surprise me, when the whole scheme is to profit from human misery. It's all germane to how they do business.

EIR: Do your constituents feel that private prisons aren't a good idea?

Towns: Yes, especially where Tennessee state employees are concerned. I held a town hall meeting two years ago. There

were 4-500 people there from across the state. No one was for private prisons. People who work in the system were against it and the general populace was against it. There were former wardens who were against the privatizing concept.

EIR: What reasons did the wardens give?

Towns: They talked about how the operation was purely for profit motive, and how people were not managing it efficiently, not taking care of the people. They talked about how, within a privatized system, you don't have the same redress of their problems.

EIR: The rate of HIV infection in Tennessee prisons is about 27% for those inmates tested, who were under 21 years old.

Towns: This is a problem people don't want to talk about. The penal system is a breeding ground for sexually transmitted diseases. People are gang-raped. We tolerate this because people don't care about prisoners once they're locked down. But those same persons return to the community. The key turns twice. It turns once, to lock them up, and a second time, to let them out. Whatever they have is transported back to your community. We don't want to deal with the dark side of the penal system. It's a downright disgrace that people can go to jail and serve some time for one situation and come out with HIV because they've been gang-raped.

HIV is epidemic within penal systems across this country, and a lot of those people come right back in the community. They've never been tested. They try to resume their same lifestyle, and they transmit it to some woman, and then after they break up, it's transmitted to someone else. In the African-American community, a lot of the AIDS that is being introduced is coming out of the penal system. I think that if prisoners are raped in the penal system, then the penal system should be penalized for it, because they don't have enough protection. You make a mockery out of the criminal justice system by ensuring that there's crime in the penal system. Dope is in there, rape is in there, alcohol, contraband, and women.

EIR: The current issue of *Atlantic Monthly* has a story titled "How Prisons Established to Fight Crime Produce Crime."

Towns: That's exactly right. Where do the drugs come from? Drugs are coming from the people that work there. You have organized crime within the penal system. That's a market right there. It's all money. Cheap labor. It's all designed to generate an economy. People working for 22¢ an hour, or 15¢ an hour, making furniture that sells for a competitive price.

There's another problem, with people who have committed a crime being reintroduced back into the ranks of voters. Once you serve your time, you should be allowed to have your rights back.

EIR: That affects as many as one-quarter of the African-American male population in many states.

Towns: That's part of the reason why it's being exploited, because it decreases the numbers of African-American voters.