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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

***13th Forward Coalition Releases Letters from Incarcerated New Yorkers
Detailing Their Horrific Experiences of Forced Labor Behind Bars***

***Letters Reveal Staggering Accounts of Coerced Labor, Poor Working Conditions,
Abysmally Low Wages, and Abusive Treatment by Staff.
In Response, Advocates Call on Albany to Pass Legislation to Ban Forced Prison
Labor Statewide***

(NEW YORK, NY) - The [13th Forward Coalition](#), in response to a series of letters from incarcerated New Yorkers detailing their experiences of forced labor behind bars, called on the New York State legislature to pass the [No Slavery in New York Act](#) to ban coerced prison labor statewide.

Mailer sent to incarcerated New Yorkers: <https://tinyurl.com/3m75s8ux>

Read the collections of letters here: <https://tinyurl.com/2w2tc5ny>

This legislation would abolish the prison labor exception that allows for modern-day slavery for people incarcerated in New York's prisons and jails. *New York Magazine* [reported](#) on these letters today.

Throughout the letters, incarcerated individuals detail instances of subhuman working conditions that include being subjected to grueling hours with few — if any — breaks, extremely low pay, and abuse by the prison staff overseeing their work.

The wages for individuals behind bars are abysmally low. The [minimum wage](#) in New York State is \$15 per hour, and \$16 per hour in New York City and the surrounding suburbs. Incarcerated individuals, however, make on average approximately \$0.62 an hour, with some being paid as little as \$0.10 per hour or \$3.00 per week before their wages are garnished for any fines or fees.

Individuals also indicated that they do not receive sick days or mental health days, leading to them either being forced to work while they are unwell or suffer cuts to their wages, which are needed for many to afford commissary items like food, stamps, and toiletries.

Moreover, numerous individuals cited the rising prices of commissary items as a source of stress and frustration, given that the rising item costs have not been mitigated by any increase in wages. Others stated that the low wages made it difficult or impossible to send money back home to their families. “With these wages you're not able to afford to take care of yourself much less purchase anything for loved ones outside the walls,” wrote one incarcerated individual.

The conditions in which these New Yorkers are forced to work were also a point of concern, with one individual calling their work environment “dangerous and filthy” and another comparing it to a “sweatshop”. Another likened their work behind bars to “nothing less than a modern day slave camp.” People in custody in most cases are not given a choice as to where they will be forced to work, instead being assigned to any open position regardless of the individual’s interests, talents, or desire to practice a skill that could be helpful in their reintegration to society once they are released.

The prison staff tasked with overseeing the individuals were also characterized in many of the letters as abusive, disrespectful, and demeaning. Harsh punishments for small infractions were commonly cited, with individuals stating that pay cuts and lost wages as ever-present threats if they stepped out of line. One individual stated they had “never felt so humiliated” as they did working in prison.

Many of these New Yorkers also wrote that speaking out against the abusive conditions only resulted in retaliation from supervising officers. “Inmates that refuse to work are harassed and picked on... and not given things they [are] entitled to like little things like toilet paper, or prevented from going to commissary,” wrote one incarcerated New Yorker.

Others stated that failing to show up to work would result in punishments ranging from citations and fines to stints in solitary confinement. One incarcerated worker wrote that “If you don’t show up for work your [getting] a ticket for misbehavior report which may affect your release from prison or other areas such as joining college programs, purchasing food from commissary or even using the phone to call your family.”

Another incarcerated individual wrote that disciplinary action was taken not only for those who refused to work outright, but also for incarcerated people who declined to work on their days off or work additional shifts when instructed, indicating a blatant disregard from prison officials of the mental and physical wellbeing of all those in New York State custody.

Corcraft, the brand name under which DOC sells the goods manufactured by incarcerated New Yorkers, describes in the “About Cordraft” section of their 2023 calendar the “benefits” of prison labor, stating “New York’s correctional industries programs originated in the 1820s and were models for prison programs in the United States and Europe.”

Contrary to Cordraft’s attempt to frame forced prison labor from the 1800s in a positive light, the conditions that incarcerated individuals suffered during that time were brutal. Torture techniques used on incarcerated New Yorkers at the time were extremely similar to those used against enslaved Americans, and they included whippings, being strung up by fingers, the placement of an iron crown on one's head, being held in a dark cell, water boarding, and more. This is well documented by primary sources including [state legislative reports](#), [investigations by the New York Times](#), and within the [corrections history community](#).

See the 2023 calendar here: <https://tinyurl.com/5n6vx66u>

“The treatment that incarcerated individuals — who are disproportionately people of color — are forced to endure while working in New York State prisons and jails is shocking and abhorrent,” said **Bryant Bell, paralegal casehandler in the Decarceration Project at The Legal Aid Society**. “I know because I endured it. In Coxsackie, I worked for Corcraft making swivel chairs for a meager prison wage. In addition to being exploited,

we were humiliated too. I recall civilians visiting our work and living conditions like we were animals in a cage. Today, incarcerated New Yorkers work grueling hours, and they receive mere pennies a day for their labor, which is scarcely enough to afford the inflated price of commissary items that many need just to get through the day. This treatment is an affront to the dignity inherent within all human beings and the growth that incarcerated individuals make during their time inside. Our leaders in Albany must put an end to this inhumanity by passing the No Slavery in New York Act, which will ban the cruel practice of forced labor and finally abolish the prison labor exception that has allowed for modern-day slavery to thrive in detention centers across New York State.”

“As a formerly incarcerated person who was subject to this legal loophole allowing the continuation of slavery through forced labor, I am viscerally aware of how cruel and inhumane these practices are,” said **Rosemary Rivera, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York**. “We must abolish anything and everything that dehumanizes, devalues, or demeans Black, Brown, and Indigenous people - and prison slavery does just that. We must pass the No Slavery in New York Act without delay.”

"Being forced to work under circumstances of coercion, for little to no money, is slavery. Full stop," said **Carmela Huang, Senior Attorney at the National Center for Law and Economic Justice**. “There is nothing about prison bars that magically converts slavery into something wholesome or beneficial. And it is far overdue for New York to take a stand and say, clearly and unequivocally, that no person should ever be subject to slavery."

“We at A Little Piece of Light hope the New York State Legislature can understand how immoral and unethical the continued use of the antiquated prison slavery system is" said **Donna Hylton, Founder & CEO of A Little Piece of Light**. "No human-being is a commodity. The No Slavery in NY Act must be passed immediately so we can get one step closer to ending slavery in our state once and for all. Put simply, doing so is the moral and just thing to do”

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