The February closure of Prairie Correctional Facility (PCF) by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) is a historic victory for AFSCME in the battle against prison privatization. After battling for 15 years to keep privateers out of Minnesota, AFSCME’s efforts finally paid off: The first and only private prison in the entire state is now closed.

Adds Tim Henderson, a corrections officer and president of Local 2728 (Council 5): “For many years, we have been lobbying for a bill that will prevent our state from renting out its responsibilities. A growing number of legislators are now convinced that privateers shouldn’t profit from prisons.” “Shutting it down is a huge victory for us,” says Eliot Seide, Council

Cost-cutting measures by cash-strapped states are making prisons more dangerous and less effective, posing serious safety threats not only to corrections officers but to the general public. Alarmed corrections officers are lobbying their representatives, picketing in the streets and speaking out against these Draconian actions. Their message: Stop the staff layoffs, the suspension of rehabilitation programs, the closure of corrections facilities, and the premature release of inmates to justify putting more corrections employees out of work.

Last November, more than 50 corrections officers – all members of Local 7010 of the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association (OCSEA) – rallied outside the Mansfield Correctional Institution. They were protesting a move by state officials to lay off 41 employees and eliminate 118 vacant positions. “We want the public to know about the increasing assaults on officers at the prison, overcrowding and low staffing levels,” says Doug Mosier, local president. “There have been 43 assaults against officers in the last three months. With reduced staffing, I’m concerned about our ability to effectively put down a riot.”

COs at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) in Lucasville also protested cost-cutting.
Prison Safety Bill Survives Veto

A strong push by Council 4 corrections officers helped convince the Connecticut state Legislature to overwhelmingly override Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell’s veto of a prison safety bill. Public Act 09-223, which passed last year, will create a permanent committee responsible for overseeing the health and safety of correctional staff who work in the state’s prisons.

“Our members walk Connecticut’s toughest beat, and that beat is only getting tougher,” Local 391 President Jon Pepe said. “This legislation won’t cost taxpayers any money, but it will save lives.”

COs to Get New Radios

Thanks to a $1.5 million federal grant awarded to the Kansas Department of Corrections (DOC), AFSCME COs will receive 1,800 new radios this year. After more than a year of pressing the governor, lawmakers and management officials for new radio equipment, “we finally won on a major safety issue,” says Dan Ball, a corrections officer and member of KOSE/AFT/AFSCME Local 300. “Radios are our lifeline,” he says.

To discuss implementation of the grant, AFSCME COs met with DOC Commissioner LaDonna Thompson in February. They also discussed a plan to move inmates and officers among four prisons to ease overcrowding.

Budget Cuts Threaten Prison...

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measures by walking the picket line outside the prison gates in December. Facing a large deficit, the state closed three towers at SOCF. “This is bad for prison security and bad for community safety,” says Gary Shepherd, president of OCSEA Local 7330. “These towers are the last line of defense between the inmates on the inside and the community on the outside, including two schools within walking distance. We don’t plan to lose these towers without a fight.” The Lucasville towers played a major role in keeping the community safe during an April 1993 riot; the longest prison siege in U.S. history lasted 11 days. When it was over, CO Robert Vallandingham was dead. The Lucasville officers also oppose a plan that creates additional security risks by lowering the number of officers who are required to be present in visiting rooms.

Increasing assaults on staff at Connecticut state prisons in Enfield, Somers and Suffield have prompted COs to take their case to the media. At a press conference in January, Harry Harrison and Pete Kuhlman – both members of Local 391 (Council 4) – spoke about surviving the assaults in December at the Northern Correctional Institution in Somers. Kuhlman’s neck was slashed by an inmate wielding a razor blade as the officer tried to remove the man from his cell. Harrison was knocked down and punched by two inmates. “These assaults are a consequence of lower staffing levels at the prisons,” says Jon T. Pepe, local president. “Our members are very dedicated to the work they do, even risking their own lives.” The assaults prompted Pepe to request that corrections officials transfer certain inmates out of the state’s maximum-security prison. He has not yet received a response.

More than Numbers. Prison officials are also concerned about the effects of budget cuts on safety. “These decisions to cut costs have made the state less safe and have interfered with the rehabilitation of offenders,” said Kansas Department of Corrections Secretary Roger Werholtz. Speaking before an oversight committee at the state Legislature last year, Werholtz testified that the agency’s reduced budget has resulted in the loss of 300 positions and the suspension of programs that prepare inmates for release and monitor them once they leave prison. “These are more than just numbers,” noted Rep. Jim Ward (D – Wichita). “This is going to have an impact on the safety of our communities.”

In Iowa, Corrections Dir. John Baldwin recently told the state’s Board of Corrections that budget cuts were forcing the closure of some prison living units, prompting reports of increased tensions, and more inmate fights.

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Budget Cuts Threaten Prison...

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Spurred by the same concerns, AFSCME members in Texas are working with prison administration officials to seek a waiver from budget cuts in order to save 2,037 jobs from elimination. “Reduced staff levels could place public safety and the security of the institution at risk,” says Brian Olsen, Council 7 executive director. “Unless the agency gets an exemption from some of the cuts, the state will have to lay off thousands of employees.”

In Illinois, Council 31 Exec. Dir. Henry Bayer, who is also an International vice president, blasted state officials for the “reckless budget cuts, mismanagement and neglect that have left state prisons severely short of staff.” He specifically took the Department of Corrections to task for its decision to release nearly 2,000 inmates as a cost-saving measure. The premature-release programs, he said, were intended to justify the governor’s threatened layoff of more than 1,000 prison employees. “State prisons are increasingly dangerous due to lack of staff,” Bayer said, noting recent “disturbing outbreaks of violence” by prison inmates against employees at Dixon, Hill, Illinois River, Logan, Pinckneyville, Pontiac and other corrections facilities.

We Fight, We Win. Despite daunting challenges, AFSCME corrections offices are determined to fight back. In Nevada, the state prison was placed on the chopping block during budget battles last year between Gov. Jim Gibbons (R) and the state Legislature. Shutting it down would have accounted for more than 160 layoffs. But union members questioned the projected savings of $12.7 million and fought the planned closure of the Nevada State Prison (NSP). They marched in front of the Capitol carrying placards and shouting, “They say cut back, we say give back!”

State lawmakers agreed and rejected the governor’s moves to shut down NSP – not once, but twice. State Assembly Speaker Barbara Buckley explained why: “State workers have taken the largest cuts of any public employees in the state. We thank them for their sacrifice. They are doing more with less.”

“Keeping the state prison open is good news,” declares CO Kevin Ranft of AFSCME Local 4041. “We were poised for a big fight, but our lobbying and rallying paid off. We rose to the challenge and did whatever it took to ensure no layoffs.”

Minnesota COs Beat Privateers

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5 executive director and an AFSCME International vice president. “We’re pushing government to take responsibility for corrections, not pass the buck to private corporations that profit from prisons.”

CCA completed construction of the 1,600-bed Appleton facility in 1992 and admitted its first inmates a year later. When Minnesota decided to build a state prison in Rush City in 1997, AFSCME successfully lobbied to thwart CCA’s bid to operate it. After a lengthy debate, legislators refused to allow a for-profit entity to manage what has commonly been a public function.

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Corrections officers in Illinois have been protesting budget cuts and prison mismanagement that have led to outbreaks of violence in state prisons.

The Prairie Correctional Facility in Appleton, Minn., shut down in February. A private company owned and operated the prison for more than 15 years.
The next generation of AFSCME leaders is one that considers iPods and social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter necessary items in labor’s modern tool chest. These men and women – 35 and younger – view their union through new eyes, with fresh ideas. They deserve to be heard, encouraged and included.

These young activists are all part of the union’s Next Wave – groups of young members who come together at the local, state and national levels to discuss how to make AFSCME stronger. Last June, they met in Chicago for the first national Next Wave conference to examine ways to recruit, engage and educate younger members to step up and get ready for future union leadership.

One of them is Matt Davis, a Wisconsin state corrections officer – the embodiment of an energetic, youthful AFSCME leader. At 33, he’s already a steward, a member of Local 48’s executive board, and an elected representative of his union’s Coalition of Correctional Institutions committee.

Larry Lautenschlager, president of Local 48 and treasurer of Council 24, recognized Davis’ zeal for activism the first time he showed up at a union meeting approximately five years ago. Back then, Lautenschlager wasn’t sure Davis’ enthusiasm was such a good thing. “When Matt started attending membership meetings, he asked a lot of questions, which was good,” Lautenschlager explains. “But I just didn’t know how to take him at that time. I thought, maybe Matt was there to cause some problems.”

Lautenschlager realizes now he misunderstood the young man’s single-minded focus on the concerns of the roughly 100 corrections officers represented by the local. But that’s just a portion of the 740 Department of Health Services and Department of Corrections employees the local represents at two distinct but adjacent psychiatric care institutions in Winnebago.

The majority of Local 48’s members are nurses’ aides, psychiatric care technicians, food service employees, maintenance and grounds workers and clerical staff. So it was understandable that Lautenschlager – a resident care technician at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute – thought Davis focused his concerns too narrowly.

But Davis, who works at the adjacent Wisconsin Resource Center, says he had strong opinions about issues affecting his fellow COs, and just wanted to raise...
Minnesota COs Beat Privateers

In February – due in large measure to AFSCME’s prodding – state legislators introduced a bill that prevents housing inmates in privately-owned prisons and makes it illegal for the state to contract with private prisons in other states. If this measure passes, Minnesota would be the fourth state to ban privatization of public corrections facilities. Illinois paved the way in 1990, followed by New York in 2000. Louisiana enacted a moratorium on private prisons in 2001. In each of these cases, state legislators feared that profit-driven privateers would understaff these facilities and jeopardize prison safety.

Minnesota has been confining more offenders in state-run facilities, leaving PCF with fewer than 250 inmates in 2009. These prisoners had been transferred to a public detention complex in Faribault.

Last year, AFSCME members successfully blocked an attempt to shut down Moose Lake prison and transfer its inmates to Appleton. “The battle against privateers can be won,” declares Henderson. “We’ve been at war with them and we won’t stop until Minnesota places all of its inmates in state-run corrections facilities. That is our mission.”

In 2008, CCA – the nation’s largest owner and operator of private prisons – siphoned off $1.46 billion from taxpayers across the nation on its way to earning record profits of $151 million. CCA holds 75,000 inmates at more than 65 facilities it owns or operates in 19 states.

NEWS BRIEFS

CO Bill of Rights

At the request of AFSCME corrections officers, Maryland State Sen. Donald F. Munson (R) is sponsoring S.B. 887, a bill that would create a state corrections officers’ Bill of Rights. A companion measure was also introduced in the House by Del. Galen R. Clagett (D-Frederick). If passed, it would create a hearing board for officers who have been disciplined with a suspension of more than 10 days. CO Henry Gladden, a member of Local 1772 (AFSCME Maryland), says the bill grants to corrections officers rights that others take for granted. “Currently, COs may be fired without a great deal of evidence to support their dismissal,” he explains.

“COs have asked for a Bill of Rights for years,” recalls Del. John P. Donoghue (D-Washington), a co-sponsor. “This would clarify what officers’ rights are regarding investigations and hearings.”

The 2008 case of a Maryland CO who was fired amid allegations of inmate abuse, charged as a criminal, tried and then declared innocent, spurred legislators to craft the bill.

New Mexico DOC Fined

In January, New Mexico’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined the Department of Corrections, ordering it to comply with safety regulations and to change its defensive tactics training.

Council 18 had filed a grievance in December and notified OSHA because numerous adult probation and parole officers have been injured during the annual training. According to news reports, some state employees said they were beaten with batons, roughed up with handcuffs and suffered broken bones during a defensive tactics course. The workers said they lost their jobs because they couldn’t take the punishment.
Preventing to Lead
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his concerns with his union’s leaders. “Not that we were ignored, by any means,” he emphasizes. But Davis was determined to let his local’s leaders know what was going on with them.

Several months later, Davis decided to get even more active, applying to the local’s executive board to become a shop steward. “I was just interested in becoming a more vocal representative,” he says.

Once again, Lautenschlager wasn’t sure what to make of this up-and-comer. “I’ll tell you, it wasn’t an automatic decision” to approve Davis’ steward application, he says. They asked themselves – recalls Lautenschlager – “Does Matt actually want to become a steward for his own satisfaction, or is he in it for the members?”

The board agreed to support Davis, who quickly proceeded to justify their faith in him. Not only did he represent his own unit, he took a greater interest in the entire Local 48 membership. “I’m here for everyone,” Davis declares. “He surprised us,” Lautenschlager says. “Our stewards are involved in labor-management meetings, so we started getting Matt involved in some of that. He took front stage on a lot of issues.”

Demonstrating Leadership

“I like to stand up for what I believe in,” says Davis. He did just that, and his activism was noticed. Within a few years, Lautenschlager and other executive board members invited Davis to get even more involved. “Some of us saw Matt was doing a wonderful job as steward, and he was young, so we got together and said, ‘You ought to run for president or vice president.’ He said, ‘No’ – he needed to get some more experience.”

Davis agreed to fill a temporary opening on the executive board until elections were held six months later. Then he put his hat into the ring and won a full two-year term that expires this spring.

At AFSCME’s Next Wave conference in Chicago last June, Davis learned ways to encourage other new and young members to get more involved in their union. He’s now considering seeking a higher union post. “We think he’d be great,” says Lautenschlager.

Council 24 Exec. Dir. Marty Beil agrees: “Matt is a very resourceful and motivated leader for Local 48. He has made a commitment to make the concerns of young members heard and to offer a new direction, not only in his local and in the council, but in the workplace as well. Matt truly is one of our leaders for the future.”