Public Safety Congress to Address Assaults on Workers’ Rights

Meeting every two years to connect with each other and learn about what’s going on around the country, AFSCME-represented corrections and sworn, law enforcement employees from across the nation will gather in Houston, Texas, from Sept. 16 through 18.

“This may be the most important Public Safety Congress we have ever held,” declared Pres. Gerald W. McEntee and Sec.-Treas. Lee Saunders in their invitation to attendees. “We are facing the most severe attacks in our history. Public safety workers as well as civilian public employees are facing drastic cuts in funding and layoffs and attacks on our pensions and health care. And this year, unlike any other time in our history as a union, we are facing a widespread and determined effort to deprive us of our very right to collectively bargain and engage in political and legislative activity.”

The three-day event will occur at the Hilton Americas Houston Hotel. It will feature keynote addresses from President McEntee and Sec.-Treas. Saunders, plenary sessions on what AFSCME members are doing to fight back and roundtable discussions.

Workshops on pensions, health benefits, collective bargaining laws and a variety of other important topics will provide public safety officers the information they need to defend themselves on the job and arm them with the tools to build their union.
Gov. John Kasich’s (R) misguided plan, to sell five state prisons to private corporations, has stirred angry protests from corrections officers and community supporters. Critics of the sale — including legislators and civil rights advocates — assert that the state is gambling with public safety as well as the safety of corrections employees.

“The governor is selling them at ‘fire sale’ prices,” says Craig Cassidy, a corrections officer at the Grafton Correctional Institution (GCI), one of the prisons slated for sale. “That means big profits for out-of-state companies at the expense of Ohio taxpayers. The sale is one-time money, a temporary fix for a long-term problem.”

Adds state Rep. Matt Lundy (D), a strong opponent of privatization: “If the sale goes through, you’re selling valuable assets during a recession, which means you’re not getting top dollar, and employees are only going to get two-thirds of their current salaries.”

Cassidy, chapter president of the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association (OCSEA) Local 4710, points out that private companies will trade good jobs for bad jobs because inexperienced, lower-paid employees will bring in more profits. “But we know that it’s prison security and public safety that will suffer. Privatizing these facilities will further erode the middle class in this area of the state and destroy the Grafton community.”

The other four facilities up for sale are North Central Correctional Institution (NCCI) in Marion, the adjacent Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility (which is currently vacant), the North Coast Correctional Treatment Facility (NCCTF) in Lorain County and the Lake Erie Correctional Institution in Conneaut, Ashtabula County.

CCA, GEO Group and MTC are the three largest private prison operators in the U.S. None of them are from Ohio so any profits would be going out of state. The terms of their bids have remained secret. The state had planned to award contracts by Sept. 1, with the new operators taking over by Jan. 1, 2012.

Concerned about the secretive process in which Ohio prisons are being privatized, lawmakers have raised questions about the safety record of for-profit companies and conflicts of interests for the Kasich administration. It has been widely reported that Kasich received contributions for his transition fund of $10,000 each from two of the companies that have made bids. All three companies have also hired Kasich’s former congressional chief of staff and two political advisors to lobby for their firms’ interests. Moreover, Kasich’s hand-picked prison director used to work for CCA.
Prison Privatization as Political Payback

Across the country, politicians have been selling off public assets to private businesses in exchange for hefty campaign contributions and sweetheart deals. The politicians claim they are saving tax dollars, but when the real costs are examined, it’s only the corporations — who back them financially at election time — who are making a financial killing on the deals. This kind of corrupt payback to wealthy, corporate CEOs has produced numerous disasters for taxpayers, who end up paying more in the long run.

Nowhere has this “pay and play” scandal been more outrageous than in the recurring efforts of some governors to privatize their state prisons. They sell the prisons to private contractors — including the GEO Group, Corrections Corporation of America, and the Management & Training Corporation — who then cut corners on safety, health and services. Some contractors refuse to accept the most-hardened offenders or those who are in need of medical and psychological services. Even without those prisoners, they drive up costs to increase their profits.

All too often, private prisons cause more problems than they solve. For-profit prisons have significantly higher rates of inmate-on-guard assault, violence and escapes in broad daylight. One reason for the increase in violence is the habit of the profitiers to discharge the highly trained staff and replace them with low-wage, low-skilled employees who are unable to meet the demands of staffing corrections facilities that house some of society’s most dangerous felons. Even in minimum-risk facilities, the privateers increase the danger to prisoners and the community when they make cuts to increase profits.

Judge Greg Mathis recently made that point in an article discussing a suit against the GEO Group — brought by dozens of family members of inmates at the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in Jackson, Miss. The families contend that the corporation forces the prisoners — two thirds of whom are non-violent offenders — to live “in sub-standard conditions, where they are subject to excessive force from staff and are sexually preyed upon by other inmates and staff.” As Judge Mathis notes, one young man, 21-year old Mike McIntosh II, was so brutally injured in one incident that he now suffers from short-term memory loss and has lost the function of his right arm and right leg.

Moreover, the politicians pushing privatization are not honest with citizens. They make false claims about savings. In Ohio, Gov. John Kasich (R) proposes selling five of the state’s prison properties, claiming the sale would bring in revenue of $200 million with no facts or guarantees offered to the taxpayers.

In fact, the real money was made by Kasich cronies who worked in cahoots with the prison privateers. As columnist Joe Hallet noted in the Columbus Dispatch last month: “Well before Kasich’s budget proposed privatizing five state prisons, his best friend, newly minted lobbyist Donald G. Thibaut, and two of the governor’s closest policy advisers, lobbying partners Robert F. Klaffky and Douglas J. Preisse, had signed up the nation’s two largest private prison operators as clients.”

Kasich is not alone in trying to sell state prisons to benefit campaign cronies and contributors. In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott (R) plans to put every Department of Corrections facility in the 18 counties of Southern Florida on the market, producing a windfall for the GEO Group, which has contributed more than $1 million to the Florida GOP. If GEO Group does what it has done in other states, potentially more than 5,000 experienced and qualified state corrections officers may find themselves replaced by unskilled, low-wage workers. Scott can claim that he is reducing costs, but experience demonstrates that any savings are short-lived. In the end, the costs will be higher for Florida’s taxpayers, as the private companies demand more taxpayer funds to boost their profits to pay their stockholders and fund lucrative salaries for their CEOs and top managers.

At long last, however, some state legislators are standing up to the politicians who are selling prisons to their campaign supporters. Last week, for example, legislators defeated Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal’s (R) plan to give corporations some of the state’s prisons, at fire sale prices. On June 6, the Louisiana House Appropriations Committee voted down a Jindal-supported bill that would allow the State Department of Public Safety and Corrections to investigate selling several prisons. That’s a victory for the taxpayers of Louisiana.

But all too often in recent years, the prison privateers have been winning these fights, even as evidence mounts that they jeopardize prison security and don’t save money. It’s time taxpayers in other states let their voices be heard. Contact your legislators and tell them to oppose expensive and unnecessary privatization schemes.
Michael Whitehead, a corrections officer at Northern Correctional Institution (NCI) in Somers, Conn., is this year’s AFSCME Corrections United (ACU) Corrections Officer of the Year.

Whitehead risked his life to save another corrections officer. Two years ago, an inmate with a history of staff assaults at NCI attacked Whitehead’s co-worker, Peter Kuhlman. The inmate slashed Kuhlman’s throat but thanks to Whitehead’s quick thinking and timely intervention, the inmate was subdued and stopped from doing further harm. Kuhlman credits Whitehead with saving his life.

For interceding immediately with “no regard for his own safety,” Whitehead was awarded the Medal of Valor by the Connecticut Department of Corrections.

On the job for only a few months when the incident happened, Whitehead recalls grabbing the inmate away from Kuhlman who was seriously injured. “Without Mike, it would have been a different outcome without question,” recalls Kuhlman.

“It’s one of those situations where when you’re faced with it, you hope you do the right thing,” adds Whitehead. “I’m extremely grateful for receiving the award and I hope to pay it back someday.”

Continued from Kasich’s ‘Fire Sale’ Page 1

At a press conference in June, Representative Lundy decried Kasich’s move towards “profitization,” the dramatic impact this would make on so many lives and families. “We need to stop this bus instead of letting the bus run over people,” he said. Added State Rep. Terry Booze (R): “We do not need to privatize things for the sake of money.” Representing Lorain County, State Rep. Dan Ramos (D) warned that “the state will be losing valuable workers because they can’t work at the wages offered at the private prisons. This is a thankless job and you have to be willing to risk your life every day, and if you risk your life you should be able to afford your mortgage.”

A Bad Idea. Ohio’s first experience with private prisons in the 1990s was terrible, and history is repeating itself with Kasich’s plan to privatize the state’s corrections facilities, says Mark Brickner of the American Civil Liberties Union. Referring to a private federal prison in Youngstown, Brickner noted 10 stabbings, two murders and six escapes within 14 months of the prison’s opening. “It got so bad the city of Youngstown had to sue the private company to secure the facility. Eventually, it closed down because it no longer made a profit. Here we are, 15 years later and the same bad ideas are being discussed.”

To raise greater public awareness about the dire consequences of privatized jails, COs staged rallies and protest actions across the state during the last few months. Local 4710 also raised funds to install some large highway billboards with this message: “Privatization is no good for Lorain County.”

Cassidy wants to keep reminding the public how bad the governor’s plan is “so it remains fresh in their minds when they go to the polls on November 8.” That’s when Ohioans will vote to repeal SB 5, the law that strips workers of collective bargaining rights.

“I’m on a personal mission to stop Kasich because he’s out to destroy our basic rights,” says James Adkins, a corrections officer at the Ohio Reformatory for Women. “We all need to jump in there on Election Day because Kasich’s attack on workers isn’t over.” Adkins collected more than 2,000 signatures by himself — an OCSEA record. On July 21, Ohio’s Secretary of State announced that the repeal of SB 5 will appear on the November ballot after certifying that more than enough signatures were collected — a number that far exceeded the required 231,147.