

## Interview with German prisoners union GG/BO about the recent prison strike in December 2015

*By Jörg Nowak*

The prison population in Germany has not been a focus of trade unions in the past, but it is an emerging site of industrial labour. Out of 60.000 prisoners in Germany, around 40 000 are workers and the rest are either retired or sick. In 11 out of 16 federal states, prison labour is forced labour. All major automobile producers in Germany are subcontracting assembly work to prisons, as well as white-goods producers and solar-energy companies.

Prisoners earn between € (Euro) 1.50 and €2 an hour while the German minimum wage is €8.50, and they do not have a right to strike. Prison workers are covered by unemployment insurance but excluded from old-age insurance. A law for old-age insurance was planned in 1977, but never legislated. The companies that outsource work to prisons are exempt from contributions to social insurance funds. Thus the unemployment insurance is covered by tax-payers.

While prison guards have long been organised in two different trade unions, prisoners were not organised until 2014. Two prisoners in Berlin-Tegel created the prisoners' union GG/BO (Gefangenengewerkschaft/Bundesweite Organisation) in May 2014, and it now has around 800 members in more than 40 German prisons. A section was founded in Austria in late 2015.

The German state responded to the foundation of the union with various forms of repression against its activities, such as suppressing mail contact, confiscating members' union cards, isolation of spokespersons of the union, and violating prisoners' human rights to organise in a union as workers. Since prison workers are not defined as workers by German law, the rights of these workers are denied by the state, and the union is not recognised as a legitimate representative of prison workers.

In Butzbach prison in Hesse, a strike of prisoners erupted in December 2015. Between 15 and 20 went on hunger strike for 11 days, and 200 out of 540 inmates refused their meal on the first day of the strike. The strike was supported by the Network for Support of Inmate Workers, composed of activists and academics. More than 120 academics and trade unionists from Germany, India, Brazil and South Africa declared support for the prisoners' demands on the first day of the strike. The strike received considerable attention from the media, but the demands were not met by the regional state of Hesse. The network organised two demonstrations close to Butzbach prison during the strike.

Jörg Nowak, one of the members of the network and a post-doctoral fellow at Kassel University, interviewed Oliver Rast<sup>1</sup>, one of the founders of the union and a former inmate.

*Jörg Nowak (JN): How was the prisoners' union founded?*

Oliver Rast (OR): In German prisons, a process of social dumping and 'wage dumping' is taking place that is facilitated by the state. There is no minimum wage, no statutory pension scheme, no continuation of payments to sick workers, and no protection from unfair dismissal. In our view, this discrimination on the grounds of social security and labour law is not acceptable. The GG/BO is posing the social question behind bars, which should have been done all along.

*JN: What are the working conditions like in German prisons? Have they changed?*

OR: In the past two decades, German jails have been turned into sites of production and factories that are run according to managerial criteria. The times of screwing together biros or gluing together

bags have passed. Many activities are based on production targets and piece rates. People are producing surplus value and not scrap.

*JN: Who is producing what behind bars?*

OR: In Germany, federal state institutions from pre-schools to ministries are having things produced in prisons. The same goes for private enterprises, which include everything from the electrical to the car industry. Furthermore, individuals can place orders with the production units inside jails.

*JN: Why was a strike called in Butzbach, and what was the reaction of the state?*

OR: Butzbach prison is located in the central German state of Hesse. There was a protest of inmates in the form of a hunger strike combined with a go-slow in December 2015. The final straw was that inmates got hold of official accounts of the locksmith's shop in the prison. These accounts do not only prove that the work of the prisoners is adding value and is highly productive, but also that it is extremely cheap. Among other things, the incarcerated unionists and the active inmates took up the key demands of the GG/BO – minimum wages, social security and freedom of association – when they launched a petition to the Hessian minister of justice, which demanded negotiations. Since the ministry had not responded by 1 December 2015, the strike began.

*JN: Do you have links to prisoners' unions in other countries?*

OR: It is important to us that we are not simply a 'prison union', but an initiative uniting incarcerated and non-incarcerated comrades in a project that is not linked to their jobs or their industry affiliation. We are a grassroots union that exists inside and outside prisons and that focuses on the world of work behind bars.

*JN: How do the established unions react to your initiative?*

OR: Grassroots unions like the IWW [the Industrial Workers of the World] or the Free Workers' Union, an anarcho-syndicalist union, are very open-minded about our activities – in fact, they have shown practical solidarity. The member unions of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB - Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) are still a bit reluctant to address the needs of the tens of thousands of incarcerated workers in Germany. But we are also noticing that they are becoming more open minded and that inhibitions are receding, which is in our interest.

<sup>1</sup> Translation from German by Alexander Gallas

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