

Toxic Sentence: Captive Labor and Electronic Waste

By Gopal Dayaneni and Aaron Shuman

In October 2005, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality announced Project GREEN-FED, a unique partnership with Federal Prison Industries, Inc. (FPI), also known as Unicor. Unicor, a corporation owned and operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, uses captive prison labor, and this pilot program promises “e-scrap recycling... at zero cost” to the consumer. If this pilot program in Arkansas, where e-waste is handled at the Federal Prison in Texarkana is profitable, Unicor plans to take it nationwide in 2007.

Electronic waste materials—computers, monitors, cell phones, and fax machines—are the fastest growing part of the municipal waste stream, rising at a rate of five percent a year. FPI/Unicor, established in the '30s, has been handling electronic waste as a business since 1994. Earlier this year, a Bureau of Prisons report divulged that prison workers and staff at e-waste recycling facilities in at least three prisons—Texarkana, Arkansas; Elkton, Ohio; and Atwater, California—were exposed to toxics like cadmium and lead.

The enormous amount of toxic waste generated from obsolete electronics is largely hidden from consumers and those who handle the waste. Driven by an industry model of planned and perceived obsolescence, over 100,000 computers become obsolete in the United States every day. The EPA estimates that 250 million computers will become obsolete in the next five years, and that figure doesn't include all the other electronic waste, from TVs and stereos to cell-phones and digital music players.

E-waste, rich in valuable materials for recovery and recycling, creates the perfect conditions for a toxic economy in which poor communities around the world labor through exposure to carcinogenic, mutagenic, reproductive, and developmental toxins in the name of making a living. The vast majority of e-waste is exported to China, India, the Phillipines, and Nigeria, where impoverished workers manually recover precious materials from hazardous waste.

Meanwhile, a new form of e-waste processing has emerged in the United States in the last decade that can successfully compete with these dismally low wages and working conditions: Prison Recycling Programs. Sheila Davis, executive director of Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a high-tech industry watchdog group that has been challenging Unicor on environmental justice and human rights grounds, describes Unicor as “A toxic high-tech sweatshop hidden from view behind prison walls.” And since the captive laborers in prison are required to work, Unicor maintains a steady stream of workers by using a sweatshop strategy, paying pennies more an hour than other work programs within the prison. Unicor wages range between \$0.23 and \$1.25 per hour.

In its 2001 annual report, Unicor proclaims “the right to work is a human right,” but, their operations do not comply with any of the rights codified in several international covenants, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. In fact, the right to work includes the right to be paid a living wage, the right to occupational health and safety protection, the right to organize, freely associate, and collectively bargain, the right to be protected by labor laws, the right to gain redress for grievances, and freedom from intimidation, harassment, or retaliation for lodging grievances, and the right to freely choose work. None of these rights exists behind prison walls.

While Unicor engages in a range of industries, including the manufacture of furniture and textiles, dismantling of electronic waste is a cash cow for the company. Between 2002 and 2003, for example, net sales from electronic waste recycling more than doubled to over \$8 million, while overall Unicor sales dropped. Unicor handles obsolete electronics for governments, schools, consumers, and private businesses, in eight federal prisons across the country, and is expanding operations. Over 1000 people work in Unicor's e-waste recycling operations.

Unicor's facilities are intentionally low-tech and depend on manual labor, in order to occupy the greatest number of prison workers with something to do for their long time inside, and to avoid the cost of investment in machines like air-powered tools and mechanical shredders used by responsible recyclers. A Bureau of Prisons-sponsored report on occupational health risks associated with electronics demanufacturing showed higher levels of lead and cadmium at workstations that manually break CRTs found inside computer monitors and televisions, as performed by Unicor, than workstations that mechanically cut CRT glass, indicating a much greater risk faced by those who labor in prisons.

"None of what we are doing in this plant would be used in a for-profit venture," one worker says, because "it would be too dirty and hazardous, plus the Environmental Protection Agency and Occupational Safety and Health Administration would shut them down for I-don't-know-how-many violations. [But] because we are... prison inmates, the Bureau of Prisons can get away with the hazardous conditions we face daily."

The Bureau Of Prisons report, triggered by whistleblower LeRoy Smith, the former Health and Safety Officer at the Unicor facility at Atwater, California describes management's "learn as you go" approach to complying with environmental standards. The report claims that there has been no toxic exposure since 2004. Prison workers, however, describe a continuing pattern of improper handling of

materials, and inadequate health and safety precautions resulting in routine injuries, such as lacerations by leaded monitor glass or inhaling of toxic dust. Workers also report witnessing extensive clean-up operations in preparation for air-quality tests.

"Unicor hasn't been in compliance since 1994 [when it started recycling e-waste]," Leroy Smith testified in a July hearing.

Prisoners who've spoken out have been punished by guards, and those who asked for test results or material safety specifications were told to file a request under the Freedom of Information Act. "[Unicor officials say,] 'this job is a voluntary one. If you are not happy here, you can quit,'" writes one worker. "Meaning, 'Shut up. Don't ask us for anything. Do your job, or we'll replace you by pushing you out or forcibly retiring you.'"

E-waste related contamination impacts staff, as well as captive workers. Employees take these contaminants, many of them reproductive toxins and neurotoxins, home with them on their clothes and skin, subjecting their families to exposure. And for captive workers, the impacts from toxic exposure can far outlast their prison sentences.

Responsible e-waste recycling in the United States is a growing niche, led by small businesses and non-profits, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to compete with the low-cost options of export dumping and prison labor. Faced with shrinking municipal and state budgets, officials responsible for managing e-waste are most often seeking their lowest-cost option, giving Unicor's mostly Black and brown captive labor strategy a profound market advantage. For this to change, we must force these same officials to create sustainable electronic recycling programs, which can create living wage jobs in local communities where workers and the environment at least would have the protection of the law. ■

For more on electronic waste, prison labor, and Unicor, visit Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (www.svtc.org) or the Computer TakeBack Campaign (www.computertakeback.org).

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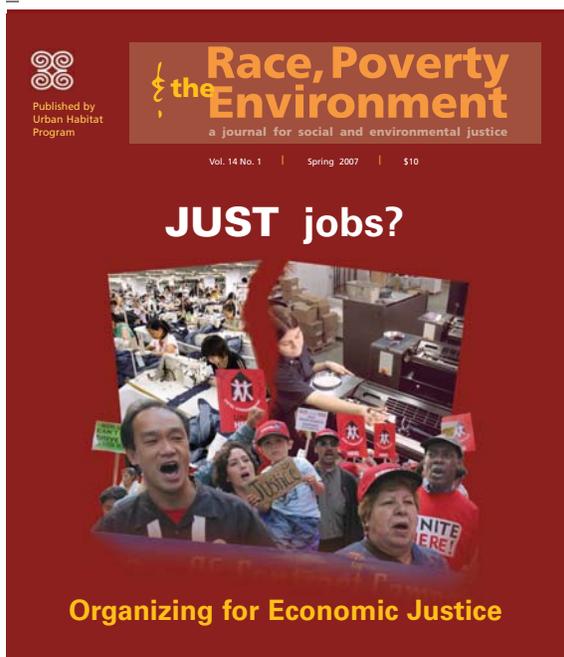
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