

Prison Profit Problem

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The recent raid of Shogun Restaurant by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) exemplifies this nation's uncertainty toward its immigration policy. President Obama declared his own movement toward reform in August 2011 as he announced the review of more than 300,000 immigrant cases in an attempt to prosecute only those who were determined to be a threat to public safety. Unfortunately, as he voices this move toward a more reasonable approach to the complex immigration issue, his Department of Homeland Security continues to perform raids such as the one witnessed this past week. Once again the public is presented with a message of ambivalence .

Sadly, as with every issue that drives this country, the decisions made both in our local communities and on the federal level are driven more by capital and corporate interest rather than sound policy-making and human compassion. The posting of virtual "Not Wanted" signs at our southern border while maintaining "Help Wanted" signs in our local communities (in the setting of sub-minimal wages and labor abuse) mimics the administration's ambivalence.

On a corporate level, however, there appears to be no ambivalence. Individuals incarcerated during the type of raid we witnessed here are often "shipped" to Stewart Detention Facility in Lumpkin, Ga. Stewart is the largest private prison in the United States, housing nearly 2,000 immigrant prisoners and owned and operated by the Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). CCA's 2010 revenue hit \$1.7 billion. The Stewart Facility, housing immigrants at a cost of nearly \$200 per day per inmate, accounted for \$30 million to \$50 million of that corporate profit.

Sadly, it appears as if immigrants are "For Sale." During the past few years CCA has invested \$14.8 million lobbying for anti-immigration laws, as those recently passed in both Alabama and Georgia. This will assure that the Stewart Facility continues to access fresh "product."

When detainees arrive at Stewart, they will be required to work at the facility for \$1-\$3 per day. Inmate employment is common in all prisons, but not when one is being held on a civil offense and in effect has no "debt" to repay society. CCA is essentially again opting to employ undocumented workers over local Georgia residents who, like many, suffer under economic downturn.

If this nation is to restructure its immigration system, we need to acknowledge that raids of local restaurants and immigrants stored in privately run prisons cannot be part of a sound, just system. Profiting off the incarceration of human beings is an extremely frightening matter and has no place in our country's security.

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