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# LABOR CONSCRIPTION IN THE PRISONS OF ILLINOIS

THOMAS H. KILBRIDE<sup>1</sup>

The present time of strife and stress has its paramount issue—to win the war—and to accomplish this the man-power of the nation must be conscripted for labor just as effectively as the boys of certain ages have been conscripted for the trenches. The boys in France cannot prevail if labor lags at home and does not furnish the necessary supplies in food and munitions with plenty of ships to transport them to their destination.

Illinois, like every other state, has some people who languish behind prison bars. These persons have lost their freedom and their citizenship through their negative acts in consequence of which they are deprived of the privileges and immunities of a free state until the disability arising from the conviction for a felony has been removed. These prisoners may be the outcasts of society, but to say that they are not interested in the welfare of their country, and that prison garb cannot cover a patriotic heart, is far from the truth.

There are nearly thirteen hundred prisoners in the Southern Illinois Penitentiary, about nine hundred of whom are of military age. These men have signed a petition and presented it to the warden praying that they might be given the opportunity to do their bit in the trenches. They are not exceptions. The boys in the other prisons are just as patriotic as the ones at Chester. A conviction for crime is not conclusive evidence that all manly traits are dead.

The United States Government has ruled that persons convicted of crime cannot serve in the army nor in the navy until the disability arising from conviction of crime has been removed. It feels that free men alone should be the defenders of a free state. It is not our purpose to question the wisdom of this ruling; however, it bars every convict from military duty, whatever be the nature of the prisoners' impulses.

We believe that a person who has fallen is on the road to recovery if a direct appeal can be made to the manhood there is in him. If a man cannot fight for his country, he can at least work for it. The man in overalls needs to do his bit just as truly as the boy in khaki. The

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nations will win who have the best food, the largest guns and the most ammunition. That is an imperative call for the entire manpower of the nation. All other considerations are beside the question.

At last a place has been found for prisoners who were worthy of the honor of being allowed to work for their country. There are many plants in the state turning out supplies for the government. All of these are short of help and are asking for more and more workers, and the demand for laborers at last has reached the prison doors.

The question of allowing worthy prisoners the chance to work for the government was taken up with the Labor Departments of the United States and the State of Illinois by Mr. Will Colvin, Superintendent of Pardons and Paroles, and a tentative working plan was agreed upon for the release of prisoners on industrial parole to be served in approved manufacturing plants where their services would be most useful to the nation. This was not to be a prison delivery. It is an experiment and the Department of Public Welfare of the State of Illinois could not take any chances. To show how men have been selected the exact words of Judge James E. McClure will be given as he addressed boys at the Illinois State Reformatory, who have been conscripted for labor. Judge McClure said (in part):

"We have not made these selections by chance. We haven't dropped these names into a hat and drawn them out indiscriminately, but we have spent a lot of time on this matter. This month, as we have done other months, and at other institutions, as well as here, we have gone through these dockets; we have looked in the big book showing your conduct in this institution; we have considered that conduct and behavior. We have looked into the nature of the trouble that you got into that brought you here. We have investigated the crimes, if any, that you committed before you came here, but above all, we have scrutinized your conduct here and how you have behaved, and how you have done your work and what efficiency you have shown; because, if you obey the rules here, if you do your work well here, we consider ourselves safe in risking you to go outside on this work for the government and to do those things which we think you are able to do. Now, that much for the confidence we have reposed in you; that much for the record you have made here, and your release is the reward coming to you.

"Some of you have been here a much longer time than others. Here is one due out August, 1918; here is another out in May, 1919; here's another out in April, 1919; here is another out in August, 1918, and so on. Now, we have brought you all in. We chopped off all that time; in some cases a year off of your time here; and I say we have done that after we have looked into it very carefully. We have put our trust in you. Now this is industrial parole. It is work for the Government. It is doing your bit. The members of this Division of Pardons and Parole are too old to

be accepted themselves in the service. They are trying to do their part as best they can and any way they can. We think one way we can help this Government of ours in this time of distress is to release some of you boys to help out in your way. By releasing you we give you your opportunity to do your bit. The plan is, as you doubtless understand it, to go to some industrial center and do some service under the direction of the Government of the United States and the State of Illinois, which will help this country win this war and at the same time render a service for which you will be paid according to your merit; according to your capacity. You will be under the direction, control and guidance of men who are interested in you just as much as we are.

"I don't know where you will go or how soon. A great many will be sent to Rock Island. Assuming that is where you will go, we expect you to go up there and make good. You will do the work there that you are best fitted to do. We have lined you up and told you these facts in order to ascertain what you are best fitted to do—what kind of a job you had before you came here. We want to know what is the best thing you can do, the second best and what is the third best, and we are going to ask you about some other things, that the State of Illinois and the Government of the United States will want to know when they come to make requisition for you; but before we enter upon that, and with this explanation that I have made as to the purpose of bringing you in here, and as to the plan of sending you out to help our country, with a full appreciation on your part of the confidence reposed, and with a firm resolve that you will make good and be a credit to the State of Illinois, and the Government of the United States, I ask you, do you want to go? Those of you who do, hold up your right hand. (All of them.) Now you have accepted that part of the contract. The next question is to get the information that we want. I am going to request Mr. Searle to ask each one of you for the information that the Government will need, the state will need, and the employer will need, in order to find work for you in the quickest time, that there may be no unnecessary delay. Now then, in answering these questions, don't say you are an expert machinist or molder or engineer unless you are. Suppose you say that you are a machinist, that you can run a lathe. Suppose you say that, when in fact you have only been a helper and never been trusted with a machine. We send you to Rock Island and the employer expects you to do that particular work. You don't have to work over five minutes at that sort of work until he knows whether you know your business or not. Suppose we misrepresent it to him, it comes back to us. We want you to be absolutely truthful and when you answer the questions, just remember that you are answering questions propounded by your Government. Let's be perfectly fair and answer honestly. If you have any trade tell what you can best do and give those trades in the order you can best do them. We want to know what you are best qualified to do. Answer clearly and distinctly.

"This is a thing that I want to impress upon your minds. While in point of service this is like the ordinary parole, yet it is widely different. You leave here knowing where you are going and that we have arranged for you to go to a particular place. There is no doubt, no uncertainty as to what kind of employment you are going to have, or what kind of treat-

ment you are going to receive. We have arranged for that. When we give you this chance we haven't stopped here to let you take pot-luck after you go out. The very best people in the country are going to be interested in your employment and going to help you. There is another thing I want to impress upon you and that is, that nearly all of you are going out ahead of your time. You are doing that because of a special confidence reposed in you. You are going out primarily to do a great service to your Government in which every one of you is interested, and every one of you has looked forward to the time when you would leave this institution and be permitted to enjoy the privileges which free men are permitted to enjoy. That great privilege has come to you.

"The honor of the state, the honor of the Government, and of this department, and of these officials, is at stake. The judgment that they have exercised is being weighed in the balance. Your conduct will determine whether it is right or wrong. Your conduct while on parole will determine largely whether other boys, yet confined in this institution, will get the splendid opportunity given to you. If a number of you fail, then the industrial plan will be proclaimed a failure by those who now doubt its practicability. It is a responsibility which we hope you fully appreciate.

"Let me tell you a little story. One hundred and thirty-two boys went out on industrial parole and located in Rock Island. Up to last week, and that is the time I had the last word, one had failed. He drifted back into his old practices. He committed larceny; took some property that didn't belong to him and was arrested. I suppose he is back in Joliet. That disappointed us very much; it is a small per cent, but we hoped none would fail. After we looked into the case we found that at one time he wasn't right mentally and that perhaps accounted for it. I want to tell you what the boys did, one hundred and thirty-one of them. Their hearts are in this proposition and when they heard that one of their fellows flunked, they passed the hat and raised the funds to compensate and pay back to the man that which had been taken by one of their number. That is the attitude of the boys at Rock Island, not from this institution only, but from the other and larger institutions, the penitentiaries. That gave us great pleasure. That is the attitude we want everyone to have. If a fellow is weak and you find him drinking and gambling and not doing his work, maybe you can help him. Just remember that we are all pioneers in this big project, and the success of it means your success and the release of other boys. The state has said it has confidence and you can go out. Don't throw the state down after that. We would not have you come in and listen to us if we were not in earnest about it.

"You are all starting out with a clean slate. Keep it that way. There isn't one of you here, not one of you, however blue you feel at times, but has some one on the outside who is interested in you. Somewhere there is a brother or sister, or mother or wife, possibly a child who is thinking about you and interested in you, and while we want you to make good, those people are praying for your release because they know you will make good. The mother, the wife, the sister, never lose confidence; and don't ever think because you have been in here that the whole world is sore and nobody cares, because they do care and want you to get out. Keep the resolve in your mind all the time, that you are going to do right by the

Government, right by the state and by the officials of the state, by your employer and, above all, that you are going to do the square thing from now henceforth for those dear ones who have never lost confidence in you."

We believe that prisoners never left an institution under more favorable auspices. The first ones were selected in May, and out of a prison population of 4,000 a total of 600 has been conscripted or about 15% of the prisoners. Possibly 1,000 or 25% will be taken finally.

What are the material results? It costs the state \$200 per annum to keep a prisoner. By releasing these 600 persons, the state is making a saving of \$120,000 per annum. No one on parole is getting less than \$4.12 a day, and some earn as high as \$10.00 a day on piece work. It is fair to say that the average earnings amount to \$100.00 a month for all prisoners released, or they are earning \$60,000 a month, with a total of \$720,000 a year.

Have the prisoners lived up to their high ideals? Let the record answer this question. Six hundred have been selected and there have been five parole violations, or these prisoners have made 99% good. This is a record that cannot be surpassed. Here are the elements that entered into this successful conscription of labor. The men were carefully selected for the work; the place of employment was just as carefully selected, with good living wages, and before a prisoner reached his destination his home and living conditions were provided. A good parole agent is on the ground daily to supervise the parolees and to assist them in every possible way, and best of all, every prisoner is animated with the laudable ambition to serve the state and nation. A direct appeal to their patriotism has not fallen on deaf ears.

Careful and sympathetic supervision has justified the parole law which permits this conscription of labor. A street show came to one of the cities where were many paroles. The show had with it the usual number of parasites and law breakers. A theft was committed and an effort was made to fasten the crime on a paroled man. The charge was shown to be groundless through the detection of the real culprit.

A colored man rather than lose time from his work sent for some of his friends and relatives to visit him. The neighbors lived close, the talk and laughing was a little boisterous, and the hours kept were a little late. An officious policeman arrested him because he was a parolee. After a careful investigation of the case he was released by the orders of the chief, who was big enough to see that no crime

was committed even if some people are a little sonorous in their enjoyment. A large capacity for enjoyment is not *per se* a crime.

One prisoner who was a deficit of \$200 a year to the state is now earning \$6.00 a day as foreman, inspecting shells. Two others make between \$6.00 and \$7.00 a day assembling machinery, and two have drawn salaries of \$10.00 a day.

There are few who have been out sixty days who have not had their salaries increased. Numerous reports have come in as to the success of the experiment, and there are no objections. One large firm has offered to take one-hundred just like those that have been sent, pay the customary wages, and has volunteered besides to pay the wages of another parole agent to stay on the ground and give his entire time supervising, aiding and counseling the parolees.

Under a definite sentence law this work could not obtain. Under that act, when a man has finished his time, he is done with the state and it has no further hold on him. The definite sentence has but one purpose—to punish an offender, but there it ends its work.

The parole law punishes the criminal, and besides it reforms him by taking a personal interest in him when the prison doors have been opened. It assists him in securing employment that makes him a self-sustaining citizen. That removes the incentive for crime. Illinois is fortunate in having one of the best parole laws in the nation, the one passed under the progressive Lowden Administration, and which became effective July 1, 1917. Under this law, every prisoner becomes eligible to consideration for parole under certain stipulated conditions, his release depending upon his crime, his conduct and the probability of his not returning to a life of crime.

The reader may ask if the good conduct of the labor conscripts will be maintained? Let this question be answered by asking one. Why do many persons ever reach the prison? Idleness and bad companions would be found as the great contributors to that end. Many persons of good ability are not in profitable positions because they do not seem to have the faculty of finding the places that they are best adapted to fill. An idle person naturally finds bad companions. Good citizens are not idle.

Remember all of the persons that have been conscripted for labor have been carefully selected. Mr. Will Colvin, Superintendent of Pardons and Paroles; Mr. James E. McClure, Assistant Director of the Department of Public Welfare, and Mr. John L. Whitman, Superintendent of Prisons, with their assistants, have been most painstaking in choosing the men. Not a man leaves the prison until ar-

rangements have been made for his profitable employment, with suitable lodging, boarding, etc. Every man has careful and sympathetic supervision.

When nearly every incentive to go wrong has been removed, is it not reasonable to believe that the parolee will go right? Many persons find themselves in prison not through choice, nor through criminal instincts, but on account of having the wrong environment. Make a suitable environment as has been done with the labor conscripts and the metamorphosis from a convict to an honest, industrious citizen will be found not a physical and mental impossibility.