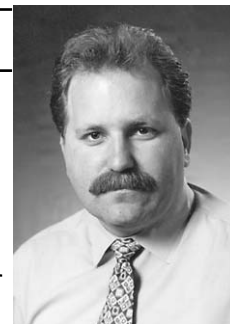

Interview: Lance Corcoran



We want to drive a stake through the heart of prison privatization

Lance Corcoran, vice president of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA), gave the following interview to Marianna Wertz on Aug. 21. The CCPOA is fighting the privatization of California's prison system. Mr. Corcoran has been a correctional officer for 12 years and has worked as a weapons instructor and a member of the hostage negotiations team. Today he serves full-time as vice president of the CCPOA.

EIR: What is the CCPOA's position on prison privatization?

Corcoran: The California Correctional Peace Officers Association is adamantly opposed to the new trends towards privatization. Actually it's not a new trend. You're probably aware that, as of 1980, there were literally no private facilities in the United States. However, as budgets got tight, many states and local jurisdictions began looking to contract out, which was a practice that occurred in the 19th century and also the 18th century, when, again, budgets were taxed. They said, "Tell you what, we will farm out our responsibility to incarcerate individuals and we will allow it to go to the lowest bidder." That system was filled with abuse, not only from a humane standard, but from a security standard.

We worked hard, in California, trying to create a *profession* of corrections. We've had our failures, certainly, in the public systems as well, but we are still accountable to the public. We are still accountable to the taxpayers. That is different than what you're talking about in the private scenario, where you are accountable to a board of directors who are shareholders.

We are in opposition for a number of reasons. One is the moral obligation. We believe this is an inherently governmental function, in terms of deprivation of liberty. Number two is the financial argument, as to whether or not they're actually saving money, because their numbers are cooked, at best. They don't incorporate the costs of intense medical care that public facilities are required to provide for inmates with HIV, TB, hepatitis—those type of communicable diseases. Then also there's the legal argument as to whether it's constitutional for the government to contract out the deprivation of liberty.

EIR: What is the extent of privatization in California's prison system?

Corcoran: There are currently five companies operating private facilities in California. They are called community correctional facilities. They are for low-level offenders, return to custody, pre-parole. They are intensely screened prior to placement, and even with that screening, they have had their share of problems. Of the 155,000 inmates in California, roughly 5,000 are in contracted facilities. Some of that number is contracted with counties, which is still public oversight. Approximately 1,500, or about 1% of the inmate population in California currently, as far as state inmates, is contracted to private facilities.

EIR: What have been the effects of the recent developments in Youngstown, [Ohio] with the Correction Corporation of America's (CCA) handling of the private prison there?

Corcoran: I think certainly that has brought light to the issue, as far as the corporate mentality of the Corrections Corporation of America. They're far more concerned with doing well than they are with doing a good job. They don't care who they house in their facilities, regardless of the security requirement. They simply want to fill those beds so that they can get the *per diem*. I think Youngstown is a prime example of a corporation without conscience placing individuals into a facility that was woefully understaffed and also not designed to hold those particular individuals.

EIR: I understand CCA is now building a prison in California's Mojave Desert for which it has no contract. It just hopes one will occur—

Corcoran: Which is really offensive to me. The reality is, when it comes to the issue of criminal justice, we are not going to build our way out of this problem. CCPOA recognizes that, the state of California recognizes that. At the same time, you have the Corrections Corporation of America building a prison on speculation. Their theory is, if we build it, they will come. Our scenario is more, you need a balance between finding alternatives to incarceration, whether it be increased parole supervision or house arrest for low-level offenders, but at the same time, finding the way to build

adequate and secure facilities to house the individuals who refuse to reform.

EIR: Can you tell me the truth about the recent California state legislative hearings on allegations of abuse by guards at the Corcoran State and Pelican Bay prisons, from the standpoint of CCPOA?

Corcoran: I've been saying: There are hearings going on, but there's not a lot of listening. In any prison system, you are going to have allegations of abuse. Whether or not there is truth to those allegations is the real question. I don't believe that the intent of that hearing was to find the truth. It was the most prime example of partisan politics I have ever seen personally. I don't know that there was the intent to get to the truth.

They were predicated on a sensationalized article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. The writer of that article is in a screen deal with Paramount Pictures and also two of the whistle-blowers, that allows for a dramatized version of their story to be told in a motion picture. I somewhat feel that some of the information that was shared has been dramatized, to bring more focus to it.

There are certainly problems with the Department of Corrections in California, but I don't think that they're systemic and I think that if you judge a system by isolated instances of abuse, then you are painting it with far too light a brush.

EIR: The chairman of the hearings was Senate Majority Leader Richard Polanco [D-Los Angeles].

Corcoran: Sen. Ruben S. Ayala [D-Los Angeles] and Senator Polanco and Sen. John Vasconcellos [D-Santa Clara] were serving as co-chairs. For the purpose of the hearing itself, Senator Ayala was the chairman of the committee.

EIR: Senator Polanco is an avid proponent of prison privatization.

Corcoran: Absolutely. He is an avid proponent of privatization. I think that his participation in this, and particularly I think that if you have an opportunity to watch some of the hearings and listen to the responses, you'll see that, no matter what was done to correct any allegations of problems, it is inadequate in the eyes of Mr. Polanco. I think his participation, if anything, really presents sort of a jaundiced view of what allegedly occurred.

EIR: Do you think the union is particularly being targeted in this?

Corcoran: Certainly. My profession was absolutely the second-class—I wouldn't even put it that high, we were the third- or fourth-class peace officers in California. When we stepped into the political environment and began getting involved in supporting candidates who support issues that are important to our members, suddenly we're the bad guys. Well, they leave out that there are numerous players in California, and

CCPOA is just a very small part of that. They like to use the moniker of the "powerful" prison guards union. I would say that we haven't been so powerful, as much as we have been somewhat successful. Certainly, if we were that powerful, I would think that we could have coordinated a hell of a lot better job of suppressing these allegations. But that's certainly not our intent. We've invited investigations. We've never interfered. But we do, vehemently, protect people's rights. I don't make any apologies for that.

EIR: As prisons are being privatized, not only is the union not included in representing the guards, but also the new guards are generally paid far less and are less well trained.

Corcoran: Absolutely. The training is abysmal and the pay is minimal. I think that when you look at their attrition rates, they are far higher. Nobody wants those jobs. That's what is really intriguing to me. It's almost to say that by allowing privates to come in and pay less and train less, that *anybody* can work as a correctional officer. I'm here to say that that's not true. To be successful, to be able to last in a career, to be able to deal with the day-to-day stress and not snap and not become part of the problem, I think it takes a unique individual. It's a very difficult job. There are literally very few rewards. We are not presented in a positive light at any time in any medium, whether it be newspapers, the TV news or Hollywood. It's very frustrating and it's very demoralizing.

EIR: Did you know that most of the prison privatization companies' stock values have plummeted by more than 50% in the last few months?

Corcoran: It's been absolutely wonderful! I am very encouraged by this. With the Youngstown debacle—and CCA may be on the ropes—we have formed a group called Corrections USA, with other states, and we are focussing mainly on driving a stake through privatization's heart, so to speak. We will be traveling to Nashville in October, to stage a protest at CCA headquarters, on Oct. 15 or 16. We are trying to rally officers from around the nation to be there.

We have associations with independent organizations from Oregon and Nevada, also New York, some of the local chapters from the AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees] affiliate there; Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey. We've been able to reach out to numerous jurisdictions. We're hoping that Oklahoma will participate. Obviously, the Tennessee State Employees Association, to me, has done an admirable job, given their relatively small numbers, in holding off privatization in that state, and we want to go back and give them all the support that we can.

EIR: In fact, the Schiller Institute, was instrumental in stopping that privatization in Tennessee.

Corcoran: It's been a great learning experience for me.