

Privatisation and austerity combined in prison crisis



(23 August 2018) On 20 August the UK government was forced to take back control of a privatised prison in Birmingham in central England following a damning report by the prisons inspectorate. The prison had been run since 2011 by the G4S group, one of three multinationals that run 14 prisons in England.

The inspectorate's report found the prison to have failed in all four key areas of assessment – safety, respect, activity and resettlement. The Chief Inspector of Prisons Peter Clarke wrote that the prison was: “in a state of crisis that is remarkable even by the low standards we have seen all too frequently in recent years.”

The Ministry of Justice has said it will appoint a new governor, 30 new staff and will reduce the prison's population by 300. The return to public management is for an initial period of six months.

The main trade union representing prison staff, the [POA](#), welcomed the move and union national chair Mark Fairhurst said: “The days of private companies putting profits before staff and prisoner safety must stop. This government's unnecessary privatisation agenda must cease at once. It is clear that G4S are driven by profit

which has compromised the safety of our members in Birmingham.”

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of PCS, another EPSU affiliate that organises prison and probation staff in the UK, said: “ If ordinary working people didn’t do the job they were hired to do, they’d be sacked. It’s time for G4S to be stripped of their public contracts.”

The UK national trade union centre, the [TUC](#) highlighted the impact of austerity on the prisons system, noting that spending on the prison service plummeted by 21% between 2009/10 and 2015/16, while the number of full-time equivalent prison officers fell from 24,830 in 2010 to 21,000 in 2017.

The research and campaigning organisation, the [Howard League for Penal Reform](#), also has serious concerns about the impact of privatisation on the criminal justice system in the UK. It says that the Birmingham case is that latest to raise questions about the capacity of the state to properly monitor private contractors following scandals relating to secure training centres, electronic tagging and the quality of the probation service.

The EPSU Prison Service network that bring together Europe’s unions organising prison service staff has long been raising concerns about the rising prison population (many of whom with mental health issues), inadequate staffing levels and the impact of austerity on workers and prisoners and that private prisons are not a solution to the lack of funding.

Network coordinator, Nadja Salson, said: “The complete disaster of the G4S-run prison in Birmingham requires a public independent review of all the prisons run by the global security leader in the UK. Public scrutiny is also urgently needed in G4S-run migrants’ detention centres in the UK and other parts of Europe that are replete with abuse of human rights, secrecy and overpriced public contracts, as revealed in the PSI/EPSU report, [Privatisation of migration and refugee services](#).

Note: the [We Own It](#) campaign group has more information on the privatisation of prisons in the UK, the only country in Europe where the private sector has a role in the management of prisons.

EPSU's website has more information on its [prison service network](#) and [privatisation](#)

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