Opinion

American prisons continue to profit from slave labor without consequence

By VIVIAN GAGE
Associate Opinion Editor

Slavery has never gone away in the United States; it has just transformed over time to keep itself hidden.

At first, this statement may sound unbelievable, because if slavery still existed, we would all know about it, right? Surely we would all be ringing the alarm and pushing for reform.

But we were lied to, and we all accepted that lie because it was easier than facing the truth. Modern-day slavery still exists in the form of mass incarceration and forced prison labor, and the majority of Americans are either unaware this is happening or have fallen for propaganda telling them forced labor is a just punishment for criminals.

But slavery is never a just punishment for anything, especially when the majority of those forced into unpaid labor have been wrongfully targeted by a historically racist justice system.

Prisons can "legally" enforce slave labor because of a troublesome loophole in section one of the 13th Amendment.

It reads, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States…"

Did you catch that? The amendment legalized slavery as a punishment for crimes.

I'm sure you can predict what happened next.

Soon after the 13th Amendment was ratified, the Black Codes were passed throughout much of the South. They were "a series of laws passed throughout the South in the wake of emancipation," which "were specifically designed to curtail the economic, political, and social freedom of African Americans," according to the Constitution Center.

The main purpose of the Black Codes was to create a steady supply of cheap labor for white people in power. The codes varied from state to state, but most included laws that declared freed Black people to be vagrants if they were unemployed and without permanent residence. Vagrants could then "be arrested, fined, and bound out for a term of labor if unable to pay the fine," according to the Jim Crow Museum.

Labor contracts ensured that Black people working as "servants" for their old masters could be arrested for quitting before their contract was over, no matter how badly they were treated. Some laws declared that Black people could be arrested for working as something other than a farmer or servant unless wielding a license to do so. Such licenses had to be approved by judges, who were also racist.

The Black Codes created countless "legal" reasons to have Black people imprisoned and forced into unpaid labor. Whether it be the Black Codes of the 1860s, the "War on Drugs" in the 1970s or the biased "Stop and Frisk" police programs of the 2000s, our country has evolved to continue finding inventive ways to send Black people to prison unfairly.

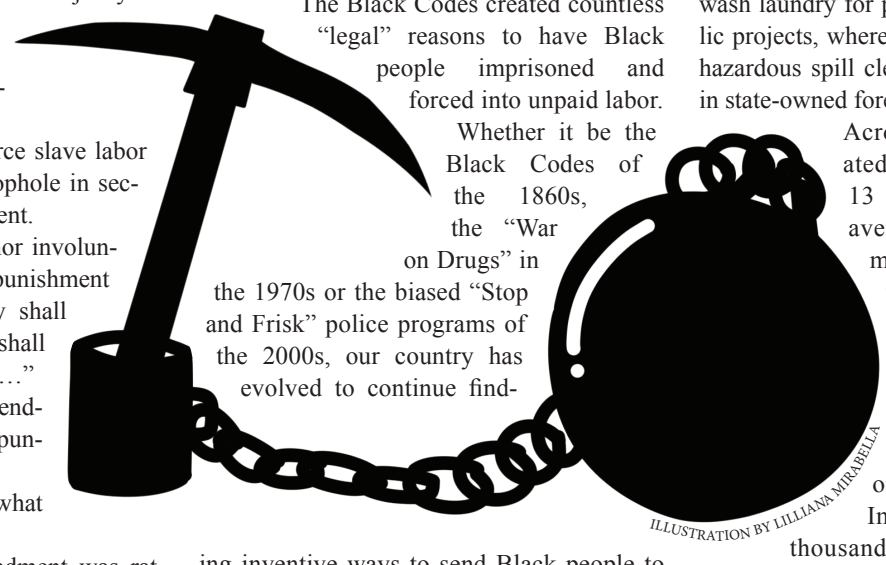

ILLUSTRATION BY LILLIANA MIRABELLA

To put their over-representation in prisons into perspective, consider that "in 2019, Black Americans represented 14% of the total U.S. population," but a staggering "33% of the total prison population," according to the Sentencing Project.

Additionally, they make up 46% of the prison population who had already served over 10 years, which tracks, considering the countless studies proving Black people get longer sentences than white people for the same crime.

Of the roughly 1.2 million people incarcerated in state and federal prisons today, nearly 800,000 are prison laborers, according to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). In Southern states especially, where incarceration rates are the highest and prison wages are lowest, this labor is strikingly similar to the conditions faced by slaves less than 200 years ago.

Around 80% of prison laborers are employed in facility maintenance and operations, doing tasks that keep prisons running, like janitorial duties and food preparation. About 17% work for government-run businesses, where "they might staff DMV call centers or wash laundry for public hospitals, or on public projects, where they might be tasked with hazardous spill cleanup or firefighting duties in state-owned forests," as stated by EPI.

Across the country, incarcerated workers are paid between 13 and 52 cents an hour on average in the most commonly held jobs. EPI states that "in seven Southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas—almost all work by prisoners remains unpaid."

Imagine that. Hundreds of thousands of people working as farm laborers, as janitors, as firefighters and as highway cleanup crews for no compensation. For decades.

On top of being underpaid, these workers don't get any of the normal protections afforded to most workers, like overtime pay or protection from discrimination. They're also denied the right to work toward Social Security, Medicare and disability insurance.

Are you outraged yet? What if I were to tell you that in prisons throughout many Southern states, prisoners are forced to harvest crops on former slave plantations? What if I told you there are reports from prisoners saying they would be sent to solitary confinement for refusing to pick cotton in scorching heat while armed guards on horseback watched over them?

According to Scripps News, "U.S. prison labor from all sectors has morphed into a multibillion-dollar empire." An empire built on the backs of unpaid laborers. Livestock and crops produced by prisoners slip into the supply chains of well-known brands like Coca-Cola and Frosted-Flakes, while consumers are none the wiser.

In Alabama, prisoners have been leased out to poultry plants run by Tyson Foods, tying slave labor to brands such as Hillshire Farms, Jimmy Dean and Sara Lee, "along with a company that supplies beef, chicken and fish to McDonald's."

Let's review. Slavery was made illegal by the 13th Amendment in 1865, but a loophole made slavery acceptable as a punishment for crime. Then, coincidentally, Black people were systematically targeted and disproportionately imprisoned from that point on, especially in the South. They were then forced to work for little to no pay in multiple industries, often on the same fields that used to be plantations.

Essentially, Americans sat and watched as slavery was reintroduced into the country and used to exploit people of color. Today, we continue to sustain this slave labor through the products we buy and our reluctance to stand against the prison system.

America will never be equal as long as this continues. Black people should not be targeted by the justice system and disproportionately imprisoned. They should not be forced to work against their will while in prison, and when they choose to work, it should be for nothing less than a fair wage. It's time we do what the 13th Amendment couldn't and end slave labor once and for all.

Bobcat Buzz

Please don't touch my laundry



ILLUSTRATION BY LILLIANA MIRABELLA

By ADRIANA CERBONE
Copy Editor

I love everything about Quinnipiac. Well, almost everything. I hate doing my laundry here. The number of times I've gone home to do my laundry is crazy at this point.

Freshman year, I lived in Commons. I know, horrible. I feel like at least once a week, someone had a complaint about the washers or dryers. People would take other resident's clothes out of the washer as soon as it was unlocked, when the rule is you have to wait 15 minutes before removing clothes.

Obviously, no one cared.

This caused me to become paranoid. I would sit by my clothes for the last few minutes just to make sure no one touched them.

There have been many laundry horror stories. My clothes got locked in the washer, and I had to pull the whole washer out, unplug it and plug it back in while panicking. This didn't happen once or twice; this happened about five times.

The dryer got stuck on 10 minutes for about 20 minutes, so my clothes were burning hot when I finally got them out.

I've had to take my wet clothes out of the washer and back into my laundry basket because no dryers were open. When I found a dryer after waiting way too long, my clothes barely dried. I swear my clothes came out of the dryer still wet or burning hot. No in between.

It's already a pain to find open washers and dryers at this school, but things just got worse.

Now, I'm a sophomore living in Mountainview. I wish I could say I'm having a better experience.

Just this past week, I did my first load of laundry back at Quinnipiac. Everything was smooth at first. I found an open washer right by my room and threw my clothes in. When my timer went off, I switched my laundry without a hitch, except that the laundry room door shutting on me, which was very annoying. If you live in Mountainview, you know the struggle, and if you're my suitemate, I'm still sorry you got locked in the laundry room.

Once again, my timer went off, so I went to remove my clothes. I remember seeing that my dryer still had 25 minutes left, although it had been an hour. But I thought nothing of it for some reason.

Now, I'm back in my room folding my clothes. Once everything was folded into piles, I noticed I only had two pairs of underwear… for a week's worth of laundry. I started shaking out my fitted sheet, thinking they had just gotten lost.

Nothing came out.

I assumed they just got lost because I overfilled the dryer (sue me) until I heard my neighbors talking about missing underwear, and it all clicked. Someone had been stealing girls' underwear in Mountainview. Creep.

Aside from that being completely disgusting and creepy, underwear is not cheap. Five pairs cost about $40 on average, and I had to buy a six-pack off Amazon to get me through the week. Can I send this thief a Venmo request or what?

So now, on top of seven classes, three clubs, the gym and everything else I do, I have to sit and guard my underwear from a weirdo for a whole hour of my day.

If anyone is reading this, please do not touch other people's clothes, especially their underwear. Please, I beg.