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Prison Jobs: Working Hard, Hardly Paid

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[00:00:00] **x:** K A L W.

[00:00:11] **RYAN:** Welcome to Uncuffed, the podcast that empowers people in prison to tell our own stories. We learn the art of audio storytelling, and with those skills, we make this show, featuring the human beings behind prison walls. I'm Ryan Pagan, a producer from the San Quentin side of the program. And today, we're talking about a topic that affects basically every single person that comes into prison: involuntary servitude.

According to the U. S. Constitution, incarcerated people are legally required to work while doing their time, even if they do not want to. It's right there in the 13th Amendment. It bans slavery and involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime.

Now some of those jobs might be more appealing than others. You could be assigned to work in the chapel, or in a program like the Uncuffed Podcast. But no matter the job, the rates are set by law. And here in California, the best paying job will get you about a dollar an hour. Most jobs pay even less than that, down to eight cents an hour.

So in this episode, we're talking about prison jobs, what they pay, and how this all plays into involuntary servitude. We're gonna start off with a tour of some of the jobs at Solano State Prison, led by Uncuffed producer Jay Evans.

[00:01:39] **JAY:** We went out to talk to some other folks about their jobs here at Solano. There's jobs in everything from bookbinding, to fiber optics, to laundry, to welding. First up, we have Isaac Flores, who works in healthcare facility maintenance. He does custodial work in the medical clinic at Solano, where the guys go for their appointments.

That means he's emptying trash and wiping scuff marks off the floors. It also means he has to follow particular procedures to sanitize and sterilize rooms too, cleaning up blood spills and things like that. It's a pretty serious work assignment. Here's Isaac.

[00:02:22] **ISAAC:** This job here, if you get certified, is a good take out to the streets because you can work in a hospital.

You know, you're working with all the chemicals. You get a job in a hospital or crime scenes, cleaning up crime scene areas. You want to stay away from people and be to yourself and just clean up crime scenes once, once they're done with their investigation. But this is right here, chemicals, like, 64. You got to know how much to put in there.

Because like, this is a little strong right here. SaniGuard is so clear that you can't tell. You could pour a gang of it in there and you won't know if it's strong or not until you use the power strip to see. So you're working with the chemicals, knowing how much chemicals to add to the water. But you need to know because if you use it too strong, you could end up hurting yourself.

Because if you get it on your hands, you know, it's chemicals. You know some people, it gives 'em rash. Some people, if you have cuts on your fingers, it could mess up your hands. But you need to know the right solutions. Same thing with the blood draws. Because especially if you're working in the ER room, you gotta clean that.

You know, you got patients coming in off the streets, some gunshots, stab wounds, people are fighting. You gotta know how to clean all that up.

[00:03:38] **JAY:** Next up will be Mike Thomas, a clerk. And a tutor in the education center. He helps set up materials for classes and tutors incarcerated students taking algebra for their GEDs.

[00:03:53] **MIKE:** My current job, it's encouraging. I like it. I'm around the right people. Sometimes things don't always go our way, or my way. For the most part I have a good supervisor.

[00:04:09] **JAY:** How much do you get paid on your current job?

[00:04:12] **MIKE:** It's nothing over 15 a month.

[00:04:15] **JAY:** It's nothing over 15 dollars or 15 cents?

[00:04:18] **MIKE:** 15 dollars a month.

[00:04:23] **JAY:** Thanks, Mike. Last, but certainly not least, we have Robert McCormick, who works as the lead man for the canteen on Sea Yard. There are four different canteens, and each one serves a different yard at the prison. The canteens are basically stores where the guys here can purchase food and hygiene items with money that loved ones send in, or from the very small earnings they make from their jobs.

Most guys here don't feel like we get enough to eat with the meals the prison serves out every day. So the canteen is vital for us. Here's Robert.

[00:05:02] **ROBERT:** If there's 1, 200 people on the yard, I would say a third of them don't have money to shop. So we're doing about 900 people in three draws. We can do just under 80 people per day.

I know what the guys are gonna need before they need it. I pay attention. I used to do what they do. So now I know exactly what product we're gonna run out of before it actually runs out of. We go through two pallets of rice per draw. And a pallet of rice consists of 56 boxes with 48 bags of rice. So you do the math. That's a lot of rice.

The other day at dinner time, I counted three bites of beans. And, you know, I'm a 200 pound man. Three bites of beans is not enough to even make a fart. I'm what they call the lead man in there. I'm number one of four people on our side. And my pay number is 22 cents. And then the institution takes half of that. After taxes, I make about 9. 50 a month.

[00:06:11] **MAZZA:** And that's because of restitution, right?

[00:06:13] **ROBERT:** Yeah. Restitution. Yep.

[00:06:15] **MAZZA:** Fines, court fees, whatever your people send in here, they take 50 percent of that.

[00:06:22] **ROBERT:** That's correct.

[00:06:32] **JAY:** Thanks again to Mike Thomas, Isaac Flores, and Robert McCormick for sharing their experiences with us. Now I'm bringing it to my fellow Uncuffed producers, Anthony Ivy and Brian Thames, to talk more about the jobs we've hated and the jobs we've loved, and how much a good job can actually change the course of your life.

My brothers, I want y'all to give the listeners a chance to hear what was the best job you ever had while incarcerated.

[00:07:04] **BF:** Well, that's easy. For me, it's this job. The Uncuffed job. Audio engineering, to be specific. Audio engineering, journalism. And a bunch of other stuff. This was my favorite.

[00:07:17] **JAY:** All right. That's right. Stick Talk, how about you?

[00:07:20] **IVY:** I would have to for surely say Uncuffed Podcast, like, all my other jobs, they was kind of like, that was bullsh** that was bump, or whatever you want to call it. But yeah, this job right here is the best job. It kind of changed my life as far as my prison life.

[00:07:40] **JAY:** Let's go to the reverse end of the spectrum. Share something with me, Brother Stick, on what's the worst job you ever had in prison.

[00:07:48] **IVY:** I would say the worst job I had was a stacker in a milk factory. You'll wake up early in the morning around like four o'clock. You go in there, and it's like a line of crates stacked up, and you gotta stack them up high on, on pallets.

And man, I'm telling you, your back really be hurting a lot though.

[00:08:12] **BF:** Oh, you wanna hear from me?

[00:08:13] **JAY:** Yes, sir.

[00:08:14] **BF:** I mean, almost every job but this, you know, I like my teacher's aide job, but all that, that other stuff, being a janitor, no, they call it porter. Being a kitchen worker, almost a waiter? No. I mean, all that.

Yard crew? No. None of that. All that stuff is awful. It's just awful. You know, sometimes forced to be around people in situations you don't want to be around doing those types of jobs.

[00:08:41] **JAY:** Yeah, I could agree with you. I had the job on the yard crew before, and nobody on that yard crew had a pay number except for the lead person.

And during that time period, this was in 2002. And that brother that had the job as a lead man, he was only making 13 cents an hour. And nowadays, pretty much... over 20 years later, the pay scale is still at that same rate.

Alright, so what's the highest pay number you personally reach?

[00:09:09] **IVY:** I reach 85 cents.

[00:09:11] **JAY:** 85 cents an hour?

Alright, and what level of preparation did that skill set give you for dealing with your return to society?

[00:09:22] **IVY:** I think that job right there, it actually helped me out, because it let me know that I'm going to be doing work that I might not want to do, or I might be doing something that I feel like I'm better than somebody else and I still got to work from the bottom up, or some people might come in and just get a position that I wanted and they only been here, you know, a shorter period of time as me. So it just, as far as that and being able to like, I had that routine of getting up in the morning at four o'clock in the morning and going to do something that I didn't want to do.

But as far as the other jobs I had, I was a a porter, a yard crew, did a machine shop, I did a metal fab. Oh, I was a computer. I was learning how to computer literacy.

Them jobs, they didn't work for me like that because I was on a level four. So every time we start, like, get, gaining, like, some type of traction, we'll go on lockdown and then shut the, the program down. So I wouldn't be able to complete it.

[00:10:31] **JAY:** You were never, ever, you never had the chance to complete any computer trade?

[00:10:37] **IVY:** I was not, cause as soon as, every time we start, we'll be going, and any kind of lockdown, it makes us start all the way over, or they might not be prepared.

They might not have the proctor come through. You need the proctor to come to be able to test us. A dude from the outside to come and test us on a test so we can get certified for certain things.

[00:10:59] **JAY:** So during 12 years of this incarceration, you only had two jobs that you feel prepared for society?

[00:11:09] **IVY:** Yeah, I think that milk job was cool, and, for sure this Uncuffed job because it helped me out with having better people skills, learning how to use Pro Tools, and just learning how to network, and learning how to be dedicated to something that you like, and stick with it even when it's not going how you want it to go. Sometimes.

[00:11:35] **JAY:** You're actually going home soon.

[00:11:38] **IVY:** Yeah, I am for the touchdown, man, they finally free me out these gates.

Yeah, I think these jobs, like, being in Uncuffed, I think this was like the perfect job as a transition of going home. Because being in this program, I'm in a DJ class, I'm a producer, I'm able to see people from the streets come in and out, and it's kinda like, it's not like, my mind is not set in prison like how it is if I didn't have this job.

[00:12:06] **JAY:** bf Thames, do you have any closing words?

[00:12:09] **BF:** Nah man, I'm still, I'm still gonna say that I'm grateful cause I am, but I'm still gonna say, whoever's responsible, somebody should have enough respect and appreciation for what we do to pay us accordingly, now or in the future.

[00:12:29] **IVY:** I'm glad to be around y'all, y'all help me out a lot.

Like bf Thames said, not only this Uncuffed job, but I think, like, all the jobs in prison, people, they need to get paid more, man. Y'all need to, you know, it's kinda like we're, like, getting lashed on the back for not, for doing all the work that we do, you know, the dirty work. I think we need to get paid, that's all I'm saying.

Pay us.

[00:12:54] **JAY:** And the struggle goes on. My best advice is for people to become more politically conscious. Understand how the economic system work out, understand civics, period. Whether you on this side of the wall or beyond the wall.

[00:13:23] **RYAN:** Thanks to everyone at Solano for sharing their thoughts. This is Ryan Pagan from San Quentin again. Now we're gonna bring it to my team at San Quentin. Tim Hicks, Steve Brooks, and Anthony Carvalho. I also asked the guys about their experiences with work in prison. And guess what? Not so great.

Tim, what's the worst job you ever had?

[00:13:45] **TIM:** Working in the kitchen, the, the, the, the kitchen at San Quentin, actually.

[00:13:49] **RYAN:** Describe that to me now.

[00:13:50] **TIM:** Yeah, it was horrible. It was nasty. It was dirty. Like, I was oppressed.

[00:13:57] **RYAN:** How about you, Steve?

[00:13:59] **STEVE:** I have to agree. I mean, it wasn't just the kitchen, it was the scullery, where you had to wear these long boots and this long apron and you had oatmeal all over you at the end of the day. It was horrible.

[00:14:10] **TIM:** Man, you know, it was this one boss, it was a CO. For lack of words, I would say he was just very determined to get the job done.

[00:14:22] **RYAN:** Ha ha ha ha. Determined to use you to get the job done.

[00:14:27] **TIM:** Yeah, yeah, he was very determined.

[00:14:28] **RYAN:** How much were you being paid?

[00:14:31] **TIM:** I think it was like, like 10 dollars a month.

[00:14:34] **RYAN:** 10 dollars a month?

[00:14:35] **TIM:** Yeah.

[00:14:35] **RYAN:** So what, like 8 cents an hour?

[00:14:37] **TIM:** Yeah, like 8 cents an hour, yeah.

[00:14:39] **RYAN:** Wow, and then you owe restitution, right?

[00:14:40] **TIM:** Owe restitution, yeah.

[00:14:41] **RYAN:** So they take half of that.

[00:14:42] **TIM:** Yeah, so I'll be able to buy like an ice cream or something from the store.

[00:14:45] **RYAN:** Ice cream?

[00:14:46] **TIM:** Yeah, that was it.

[00:14:47] **RYAN:** Oh, okay.

[00:14:47] **TIM:** Yeah, that was all.

[00:14:48] **RYAN:** And restitution, which restitution either to the state, which is a fine, or pay to, victim restitution, they take half of your money.

So you're really only stuck with like 5 bucks. Sometimes, there was that one point where it would be 4. 50, so 55 percent it would take.

So we can all agree that we've all had some pretty terrible jobs, and we had no choice whether or not we want to do those jobs. So as soon as you come into prison, you are given a job, whether you like it or not.

And you're forced to work. Otherwise, you would get a rules violation, and no one, especially a lifer, would like to have that on their C file. C file is just another term, central file, that every incarcerated person has that keeps a record of all your programming and all the bad things that you have done while incarcerated.

So you have to work. And sometimes you only get a measly eight cents an hour. Sometimes you don't get anything at all.

[00:15:56] **TIM:** Right.

[00:15:57] **RYAN:** And that leaves you with nothing. And if you have no outside support or no family, you are stuck with four dollars and fifty cents, which really can't get you anything in canteen. Because with, you know, inflation, the price of all the food that's being sold to us inside a prison has gone up. While the wages have been stagnant for the last 30 years. Minimum wage in California is 15 dollars an hour.

So, why are we only getting paid eight cents an hour for some of these jobs that we do? Sometimes we don't even get paid at all. Yeah. So, why is that, Steve?

[00:16:39] **STEVE:** Well, I guess it's this concept of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution. Under that amendment, slavery and involuntary servitude has been abolished except for people who commit crimes, and it can be used as punishment, basically, when you go to prison. And so it, the concept of it came from an old idea where if you commit a, an offense against somebody, you have to pay that off with your labor.

And so it, they created like these debtors prisons, and those debtors prisons evolved into these plantation prisons, where people had to actually work in the fields picking cotton or doing whatever they had to do to work off their debt in order to go back to society. And so that's carried over into the current system that we see in America, where when you go to prison, it's expected that your labor is a part of your punishment.

[00:17:31] **RYAN:** You know, there are those that are in our society that are thinking to themselves, Who cares if convicted criminals get paid for their work? They're getting punished.

[00:17:42] **ANTHONY:** You know, when I took my deal and I knew the restitution was there, I was burdened with the restitution, not my family. You know, and for them to participate in our rehabilitation and send in money, whether it's for canteen, even for our phone calls, when they send in money to put on the book so you can text them and use video conferencing and all that, 55 percent goes to restitution and, and, you know, it sounds tragic, but it was cute.

My wife never got the math that when she sent in 100 dollars, I'd call her back and said, I need, you know, I only got 45. And it's, she didn't get all that, and a lot of families don't, because... the indentured servitude, in my opinion, has been elongated to include restitution. That our family now becomes part of the debtor prison as well.

[00:18:30] **RYAN:** Yeah, and you bring up a valid point, this being a debtor's prison, and let's think about it for a second. Majority of people that are incarcerated are poor. That's a fact. So, you're basically telling us that not only do we have to pay this restitution, that I don't mind paying it, but you're subjecting my family into this debt?

[00:18:54] **TIM:** Paying restitution should not be a problem, but the problem of that is, is having to have your family pay it. Like Anthony's wife, for instance, or our family who have, when they send us money trying to help us out, you know, and the restitution basically goes to the, to the, the crime that we committed. You know, it goes to either the family or to the, or, or to the, court costs or, or something, you know?

So, that's just our way of being able to pay our debt to society, so.

[00:19:28] **RYAN:** And the restitution, the amount ranges, right? I know for me, they gave me a 10, 000 restitution.

[00:19:34] **CROSSTALK:** Mine too, right?

[00:19:37] **STEVE:** What was it? I mean, was it a victim restitution, or was it a punishment?

[00:19:40] **CROSSTALK:** It's a victim's restitution.

[00:19:42] **RYAN:** So, I have a victim's restitution, which is 10, 000, and then I have a court restitution, which is 2, 000.

So I have an additional 2, 000 on top of the 10, 000. For those that who, you know, don't care for us getting paid, I would challenge them into thinking that, number one, we're trying to pay off the restitutions and the fines that are given to us, right? And number two, you're incentivizing work, and you're giving these guys, you know, job skills, hopefully, and giving a lot of incarcerated men the ability to save their money after the restitution is paid.

Because we only get $200 when we parole. You get $200 gate money and then you're off and you're expected to not come back inside of prison. But, that's, that's nothing. Especially with the cost of living out there, like, what do you expect me to do with 200 dollars?

[00:20:35] **STEVE:** People want to work. People, human beings want to work.

People in here want to work. They just don't want to be exploited. And so, that's the difference. It's like, when people in society hear that we don't want to work, they take it like, oh, they should work. If I got to work, you should work. That's what people in society are thinking. If I got to work, why you don't have to work?

You know, that's not the point. The point is, is that when we labor, that labor is not going to cut costs like restitution, or help us pay for the essentials that we need, or help us create some type of future monies to help us when we get out. And so when you talk about labor, there's so many different things that go into that concept.

It's not that we don't wanna work, it is how you are taking advantage of this idea of human labor. Mm-Hmm. That's what the real issue is. You know, when it comes to involuntary servitude and people don't see that. You know, it was something that started originally, and it's been bastardized in my opinion.

'cause it started. You just paying off a debt. It's like working on the side of the freeway. I'm gonna clean up all this trash to work off my debt. But when you get a life sentence and you get a 5, 000 restitution fine, it's like, well, wait a minute. You just gave the man a life sentence. So now, what is the restitution for?

Oh, it's for punishment. Well, ain't the life sentence for punishment? So it's like, the question becomes, well, wait a minute. What is the real punishment here? You know, so it's like, you have taken something that used to be about this, and you've transformed it into something completely different, and now you got people spending the rest of their life in prison, paying restitution at 55 percent of whatever they make off an 8 cent an hour job, and they can't afford the basic essentials inside of that prison.

[00:22:23] **TIM:** You know, let's just, let's just put the writing on the wall, right? We all know that it's all about slavery. Keeping people in bondage. You know, when they abolished slavery, they had to make a way to where they could still enslave people and keep their foot on people's neck. When I say they, I'm talking about old slave drivers, you know, and people who had that control back then in those days.

But we all know they had to make a way to keep people in bondage, and the only way to do so is to put people in prison. And make them pay, you know, by working them like slaves. I mean, you can look at it differently, or people can look at it in a different way, but when you look at the writing on the wall, that's what I see.

[00:23:18] **STEVE:** Well, you got lawmakers in California saying that involuntary servitude is really a part of your rehabilitation. It's to make you a better person, so we're gonna pay you eight cents an hour to make you a better person.

[00:23:30] **ANTHONY:** And the sad fact of the matter, the wages do not even stay in line with the interest that's accruing on your restitution. So it's gonna keep getting bigger and bigger as we're making honest attempts to stand up and take our accountability.

[00:23:45] **RYAN:** To bring up your point, Tim, about the slave driver, right. You know, that's a controversial term, but I have to agree with you, there are certain states that contract incarcerated labor to companies. And these companies use incarcerated labor, they exploit incarcerated labor, and they sell their products. And I know, you know, there was like a big firestorm with Victoria's Secret and a few other companies.

Yeah, I'm name dropping. I don't care.

There's been a few companies that have been exposed because of that. And so to bring up your point, Steve, that there are lawmakers that are still trying to gain from incarcerated labor. Because how can you say that me getting paid 8 cents an hour and not paying off my restitution, or not taking care of myself, right, which is the responsible thing to do rather than rely on your family, how can you say that, that that's for my rehabilitation?

That doesn't make any sense to me.

[00:24:55] **STEVE:** The whole idea is for us to be rehabilitated and go back to society, be better people that can actually survive in society. But right now what you see in California is you see that 7 out of 10 people who are homeless were formerly incarcerated. You have people going back to society, oh no, I can't hire you because you were in prison so I can't give you a job.

You know, you got, I can't rent you an apartment or a house because you were in prison. You know, because you have a felony, or whatever. So, when you go back to society you have a disadvantage in the things that are available to you, but yet you're spending all these years in prison using your labor, and that labor is not being used to help prepare you for the society you're going back to.

That's the biggest problem. And not just that, but when you're in prison, you gotta buy soap, you gotta buy toothpaste, you gotta buy deodorant, hair grease if you got hair, you know, there's just so many things that you gotta do to help yourself.

[00:25:57] **RYAN:** Smiled at me right now.

[00:25:58] **STEVE:** I smile at you because I know your hair grease is expensive.

[00:26:00] **RYAN:** Costs a lot. Costs a lot.

[00:26:02] **STEVE:** And so, that's the point. It's like, You have to make sure that you take care of your, your bare necessities because the state is gonna give you some tooth powder that you probably gonna damn near choke to death. You know, it's like you can't use that stuff. You know, you get one roll. Well now we under the new California model now. But previously we only got one roll of toilet paper. Make that last a week.

[00:26:22] **RYAN:** Now it's abundant.

[00:26:23] **STEVE:** Now they did that, giving away, they're throwing it out there on the table. Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's a buttoned down. You know, and so it's like, everything you need to take care of yourself and build your self esteem as a human being, because I can tell you right now, if you're walking around the prison with your breath stinking, funky, and all this other stuff, you gonna feel pretty horrible as a human. Well, you should feel pretty horrible as a human being.

[00:26:44] **CROSSTALK:** You should.

[00:26:45] **STEVE:** It should be about building people's self esteem, building people's confidence, building the things that they need in order to be better people in society. And that's not what this looks like. So when you talk about my labor being a rehabilitative tool, all it is, is a tool that's breaking me down and making it where I'm just gonna get beat up.

Like you said, you got burned up in the kitchen. I got burned up in the kitchen. I got all kind of burns on my body that nobody's gonna compensate me for. And over the years, we just do job after job after job, not building no social security net, not building up anything that we can take back to society with us to say, here's something that you can use to make sure you don't come back to prison.

[00:27:24] **RYAN:** Yeah, we have to, we have to reshape the way society views the incarcerated. Not looking at us as a tax burden, but rather look at us as an investment. You're investing in human beings in order for them to be better productive citizens upon release. By giving incarcerated people a decent wage, right? Giving them education, giving them rehabilitative programs, you're basically investing in a person.

[00:27:58] **STEVE:** When you come in the system, hypothetically, you come in as a broken person. So when you go out of the system, you should be able to go out as a whole person. You shouldn't have to go out as a broken person, that's the whole concept. Because 95 percent of the people in prison are gonna come back to society.

[00:28:14] **RYAN:** Alright, we'll leave it there, guys. Investing in human beings.

And that's a wrap for Uncuffed's final episode this season. You can find Uncuffed on the radio at KALW 91. 7 FM, at WeAreUncuffed. org. You can subscribe to Uncuffed in any podcast player. The Uncuffed crew at Solano State Prison is Anthony Ivy, bf Thames, Jay Evans, and Bryan Mazza.

The Uncuffed crew at San Quentin is Greg Eskridge, Brian Asey, Juan Haines. Steve Brooks, Timothy Hicks, Anthony Carvalho, and me, Ryan Pagan. Thanks to the team at KALW Public Radio: Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston, Sonia Paul, Kathy Novak, James Rowlands, Hakim Owen, Eli Wirtschafter, and our sound designer, Eric "Maserati E" Abercrombie. Special thanks to Alastair Boone and Leenah Najeiah Bassouni.

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Thanks for listening.