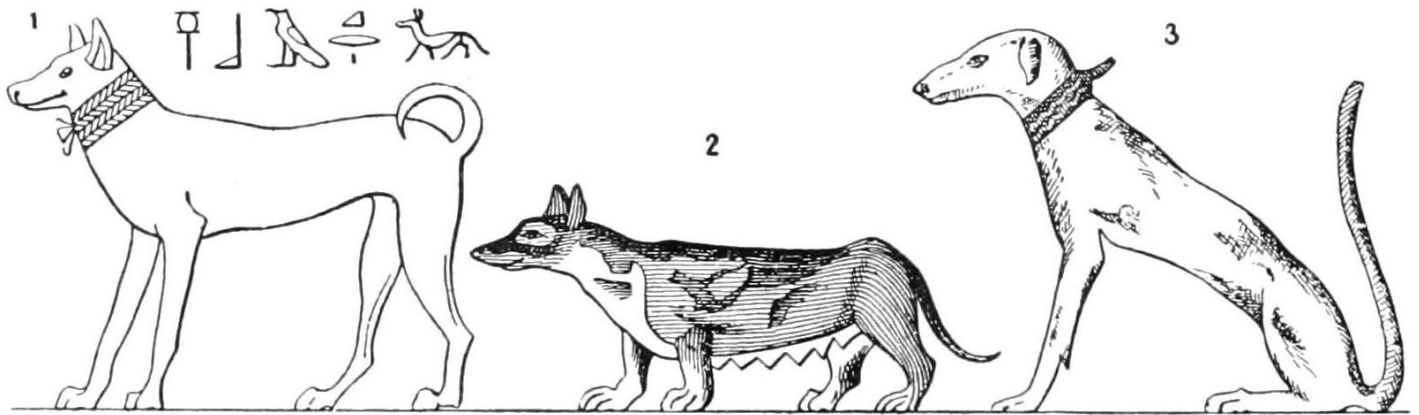


# THE OPENING STATEMENT

*of those who are supposed to remain silent*

FALL 2023 | ISSUE 18



Dear comrades,

Hello! We're back again, with revolutionary greetings and updates from the outside world. The last time you heard from us, we sent in an analysis of the "lay of the land" – what the current landscape of prison dis/organizing looks like in Michigan. We affirmed the need to be critical of reform, skeptical of state-sponsored moves towards "freedom," and suspicious of grifters and the non-profit industrial complex. Some of you really vibed with what we wrote (cool!), and for the first time in a long time, we got zero rejections. Maybe the MDOC prefers us to talk about the futility of policymaking – which we can talk about endlessly. But we also remain committed to revolutionary action, and to the conversations and collaborations that get us there eventually.

We also write with heavy hearts, full of rage and sorrow, for the thousands of Palestinians killed, tens of thousands injured, and a million displaced from Gaza since October 7, 2023. As we stated in "The Lay of the Land," we unequivocally support Palestinian freedom, and we affirm that the struggle for freedom in Palestine is intimately connected to the fight against prisons in occupied Anishinaabe land (Michigan).

Some updates on the MDOC: staffing shortages continue to affect the cages you're all held in. We've seen reports from local news outlets about staffing shortages at prisons

like Chippewa, Kinross, Alger, Cotton, Cooper Street, and others. Apparently, there are currently somewhere between 900-1,000 unfilled corrections officer positions, and the guard union is complaining about forced overtime. From the guard union's perspective, what's at stake are the guards' bad working conditions. Their solution is to hire more guards, increase salaries, and generally dedicate more money to the prison system. On the other hand, as abolitionists we want to free prisoners, shrink the prison system, defund and dismantle these violent institutions, and use that money to build a world in which people's needs are met and prisons and police are obsolete.

At the same time, though, staffing shortages can make life difficult for prisoners in the short term. So, it's a complicated situation. From our vantage point, what's important about the staffing shortages is that they heighten the tensions between MDOC administrators and guards, and these tensions mean that there are opportunities for political education and organizing. What do guard and staffing shortages look like where you're at? What kinds of problems have you experienced as a result of these shortages? What tensions, disagreements, and difficulties have you seen in this employment crisis, especially between staff? The local news doesn't care to ask prisoners what they think of staffing shortages, but we want to know. Write us!

In our last issue, we also included reports on how the MDOC forces y'all to stand outside in long lines for medications regardless of the weather – in the rain, sleet, snow, whatever. As we write the intro to this issue, the autumn rains have begun in earnest – have you noticed any changes in how these med lines operate?

A recent article in the Detroit Free Press states that MDOC is promising to improve prisoner dental care as a result of a proposed settlement in a class-action lawsuit. The article states: “It’s aimed at improving detection and treatment of periodontal disease – a gum infection that can result in bleeding, pain, and loosened teeth. Under the previous policy, the department didn’t use dental probes to check prisoners for periodontal disease upon intake, according to documents filed in the case. Incoming prisoners were just given a visual examination, along with one panoramic X-ray of their teeth. The use of dental probes is ‘just a basic medical dental need ... for saving and/or keeping healthy teeth,’ said Tracie Gittleman, a Farmington Hills attorney who represented the prisoners along with the MSU Law Clinics.” The proposed settlement calls for a periodontal exam upon entering MDOC; routine dental services including an annual cleaning after one year in prison (instead of two); and the posting of notices of the proposed settlement.

This issue of *The Opening Statement* is shorter than previous issues, because of a new MDOC policy against “voluminous mail.” According to the new MDOC policy directive on prisoner mail that took effect on August 1, 2023, a new item was added to the list of prohibitions: “Voluminous mail (i.e., greater than 12 single sided pages in legible font, which is the equivalent of a two-ounce first class postage stamp)” (section QQ, #22). This is, frankly, bullshit – it is clearly designed to make it harder for reading materials that do not come from approved vendors, including but not limited to radical zines and newsletters. Materials like these are brief and accessible, as they can be printed by anyone on the outside and often contain information and analysis that is easier to process in small portions. That the MDOC wants to crack down on the volume of paper that comes into their cages is not actually about the volume of paper – it’s about limiting speech, curtailing information, and circumventing political education. Overall, with recent restrictions on the publication of writings by prisoners and this new restriction on “voluminous mail,” MDOC is doubling down on censorship.

However, they cannot and will not stop us. This issue features a report on the Keefe Group, the private company (now owned by a Miami-based private equity firm called H.I.G. Capital) that runs the commissaries in MDOC facilities, and their sketchy no-bid contract with New

York City’s notorious Rikers Island jail. The article, which was originally published in *The City*, an online newspaper focused on New York City, details how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed staffing protocols at Rikers, which in turn changed how commissary orders were filled. Writers Bianca Pallaro and Reuven Blau also highlight the enormous price inflation on items like toothpaste, Top Ramen, and instant coffee, namely that Keefe-brokered products are between 35-98% higher than their listed price in free world stores. We included this article to build on our brief look into commissary inflation in MDOC and to provide another data point of comparison for you all, as you watch inflation continue to hit your own commissaries.

This issue also features an article on the present conditions of the Alabama Department of Corrections, written by someone currently held captive by the ADOC. We include this article, originally published in *Scalawag Magazine* (a digital publication that shares stories of “oppressed communities in the South to disrupt and shift the narratives that keep power and wealth in the hands of the few”), to give you a glimpse into another prison system in the US – one that bears quite a few resemblances to the one you’re held in. Write us with your thoughts on “(Super) Maxed Out”!

We are also delighted to announce the return of the book club! Turn to page 7 for more. And let us know how you like our first attempt at a TOS crossword puzzle!

We have also included an essay from a participant in the group *Study and Struggle*, a project based in Mississippi. The group believes that “study and struggle are necessary, complementary parts of any revolutionary movement, and that dismantling the prison industrial complex (PIC) requires centering criminalized people.” The essay we’ve included, by Kenneth, details some of the challenges and accomplishments of this *Study and Struggle* group. We hope you find it instructive and illuminating.

Finally, we want to give a huge shout out to our new subscribers, who tell us that they connected with *The Opening Statement* because someone (their cellie, their bunkie, a friend) shared it with them. To the folks who pass on TOS when they’re done with it, thank you for ensuring that these words are read and this knowledge is shared. To our new friends and comrades, hello and welcome! We’d love to hear from you. Every time you share this publication, every time you discuss the articles printed here with each other, the bonds of solidarity grow a little more.

With love and rage,  
The Opening Statement Editorial Team

## STIFF PRICES, UNFULFILLED ORDERS: HOW THE PRIVATE CONTRACTOR RUNNING RIKERS COMMISSARY SERVES DETAINEES | Bianca Pallaro and Reuven Blau

*Through a no-bid contract, the Department of Correction turned over its commissary to a company persistently criticized for gouging the incarcerated. An investigation by THE CITY found that it's charging more than allowed for scores of products.*

*June 9, 2023, The City: Reporting to New Yorkers*

In April 2022, the New York City Department of Correction signed a no-bid contract with a company called the Keefe Group to take over the commissary operations at Rikers Island, and offer a new web-based service that allows friends and family members to send food and other provisions to detainees.

The contract, which Correction Commissioner Louis Molina said would transition “the commissary process into the 21st century,” includes a list of items with fixed prices set at a rate that could not “exceed the market prices of the same products in non-discount stores (i.e., corner stores) in the City of New York.”

Yet, every product listed through the new service is being sold at a price higher than the one stipulated in the contract, and many of the prices there and at Rikers commissary more than double those at local grocery stores and online retailers, an investigation by THE CITY has found.

For friends and family using the Keefe website, a 1.3 ounce cup of Cheerios cereal costs \$3.62. Its listed price on the contract is lower, \$3.12. At the Trade Fair supermarket and deli – a typical neighborhood store a short walk from the Queens bus stop nearest Rikers – it costs less, \$2.19, and you can get it delivered through FreshDirect for \$1.49.

A 4-ounce package of Knorr stroganoff pasta and sauce sells for \$4.41 on the new service’s website. The contract lists its cost as \$3.80 and it can be had for \$2.39 at Trade Fair, and for \$1.99 at FreshDirect.

For incarcerated people using the Keefe-operated commissaries at Rikers and the Vernon C. Bain Correctional Center, which is also covered by the contract, a 4-ounce tube of Colgate toothpaste costs \$3.30. It sells for \$2.49 at Walgreens and CVS, and Target sells an 8-ounce tube for \$2.99.

The price disparities hit hard for incarcerated people who finance their purchases through jobs that pay 55 cents to \$1.45 an hour, and for their families, who typically come from many of the poorest neighborhoods in New York. Outsiders are only allowed to send food to

incarcerated individuals through the new Keefe service, which is called Access Securepak.

The criticisms of the commissary operations go beyond price. Among a dozen people interviewed by THE CITY, repeated complaints emerged about failures to deliver orders and to issue prompt refunds in such cases.

Melissa Vergara said that last January she placed \$125 in the commissary account of her son, who is on the autism spectrum and has been jailed at Rikers on a gun charge since May 2021. Her son used the money to place an order that never arrived. The same thing has happened twice since then, but she received a full refund only once, she said, after calling Keefe repeatedly for days.

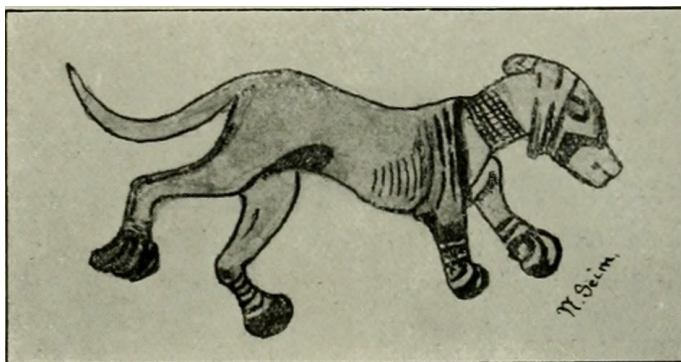
“I have three kids, and I work 70 hours a week, so for them to lose \$125 two more times it’s a lot,” Vergara said. “There is really no regard for people. I work from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., I don’t have time to do that.”

Keefe’s year-long contract, originally for \$7 million, was awarded on an emergency basis, allowing the Department of Correction to bypass the city’s usual competitive bidding process because of a pandemic-induced staffing crisis at city jails.

Three months ago, the department extended Keefe’s contract until June 20 for an extra \$6.7 million, again without bidding, even though the staffing crisis had subsided.

Dana Wax, who served as chief of staff to then-Correction Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi at the end of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration in 2021, told THE CITY, “This to me is like the extension of the emergency orders. There needs to be a real evaluation of, ‘Is this the right thing?’ Not just, ‘We’re gonna keep doing it because it’s there.’”

Keefe is currently in talks with the Department of Correction about a three-year no-bid contract for a proposed \$33 million, according to a posting by the





Mayor's Office of Contracts.

According to Department of Correction spokesperson Patrick Rocchio, that's because the relationship with Keefe has worked out well. "The emergency procurement resulted in a unique commissary solution for the Department," he said. "It was customized to meet our needs and it has been and continues to be very successful."

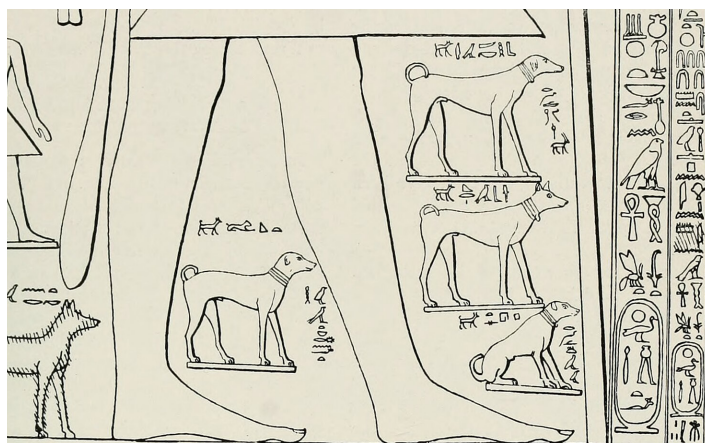
Rocchio maintained that "the current prices being offered are comparable to local NYC stores including supermarkets," citing a 3-ounce bag of ramen that sells for 60 cents at the commissary and 68 cents at a Food Bazaar supermarket. And he said that when detainees did not receive their food packages, it was likely because they did not have enough money in their accounts to cover the cost.

But each of those assertions is debatable.

THE CITY found several items at Food Bazaar at prices lower than what's on offer through Keefe – even ramen when purchased in a typical six- or 12-pack. And several family members of incarcerated people said they were persistently frustrated when they tried to get a refund on an undelivered purchase.

Mervyn Haynes, 39, has been jailed at the North Infirmity Command on Rikers Island since 2019 and suffers from pancreatic cancer. Haynes told THE CITY that this February he ordered a 7 oz. Keefe-branded chicken breast for \$5.11, but received a package barely half the listed size. After he and other detainees filed several similar grievances and complained to a correction captain, they began receiving the package sizes they paid for. But, he said, he never got his money back.

"Not only prices have almost doubled since Keefe took over, but they are ripping us off with these sorts of problems," Haynes said.



## A MASSIVE OPERATION

For decades, the massive Rikers commissary was operated by jail officers with the help of detainees, who were paid, however modestly, and received training that might help them get jobs on their release. The jail population filled out order forms and presented them to officers operating the commissary. Later, they'd pick up their purchases at designated locations in each housing unit.

The system worked, but it was far from perfect and periodically became the target of city auditors who typically found thousands of dollars of items missing from jail inventories.

Then the pandemic struck.

Keefe was brought into the picture as correction officers called in sick on mass during the covid pandemic amid a surge in cellblock violence. Officials saw a way to redeploy officers to where they were most needed by turning over the commissary operations to the company, while also offering a new purchasing option to friends and family.

The company was already working with the Department of Correction as one of many suppliers. In April 2022, it became the only one.

Keefe's two systems do not rely on physical commissary stores. Detainees call in their orders through telephones placed in their housing units and can order up to \$125 in purchases per week, with the correction department collecting the money and paying Keefe based on sales. Rocchio said detainees order an average of 3,300 packages a week.

Through Keefe's Access Securepak service, introduced in December, family and friends can spend up to \$25 a month on a list of 125 items posted on its website. THE CITY determined Keefe was charging higher prices for these items than those in its contract by matching the website figures against contractual ones. This comparison could not be done for Rikers commissary prices because the transactions are completed by phone and the Department of Correction refused to send a current price list.

Rocchio said on average 295 packages a week are ordered through Securepak. That would mean a significant portion of the incarcerated population at Rikers and other city lockups — 20% or more — receives packages this way every month. But in volume terms, Rocchio said, "Securepak has a very small footprint relative to the commissary operation."

## STIFF PRICES, UNFULFILLED ORDERS | Continued from page 4

### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Whether other companies could have performed the services better or cheaper was left unexplored, both at the time of the original contract and upon its extension this year.

The no-bid contract removed the possibility that one of Keefe's national competitors could come in with a more attractive offer. And, as with other emergency contracts during the pandemic, also left on the sidelines were local minority- or women-owned firms that may have been interested in the work. Mayor Eric Adams has championed the increased employment of such companies by the city.

When it was first granted the system was still reeling from mass absences that reached 35% of the uniformed staff at the height of the pandemic. And by the time the city extended Keefe's contract earlier this year, the number of correction officers calling in sick had dropped to an average daily total of 15%, according to official statistics.

In the end, according to the Department of Correction, the contract has enabled the redeployment of "the equivalent of approximately 15 correction officers from commissary work."

"It was not a great idea when we were doing it," said Wax, the former chief of staff, citing qualms about firms making money off an incarcerated pretrial population.

"I hate privatization in jails and wish I could have stopped it," she added. "But it was just one of 1,000 levers that we were trying to pull to get more staff."

### A FREQUENTLY CRITICIZED GIANT

In 1975, Keefe made its foray into the correctional market by providing single-serve coffee packets to a prison in Florida, according to the company's website. The company quickly differentiated itself from competitors by providing custom-made packaging in place of metal and glass containers, and became one of the largest for-profit operators of prison and jail commissaries nationwide. In 2016, the company was acquired by H.I.G. Capital, a Miami-based private equity firm known for its extensive investments in prison contracting.

Among Keefe's supporters is Mark Cranston, who served as acting DOC commissioner early in the de Blasio administration and found the company an asset after he took charge of the jail system in New Jersey's Middlesex County.

"Privatizing is the way to go," Cranston told THE CITY, arguing that it allows correction officers to be

deployed where they are most necessary. In New Jersey, the company's profits, he said, are shared with the department's inmate welfare fund, which pays for gym equipment and program services.

But Keefe has been embroiled in controversies going back years, including two bribery scandals and repeated criticism across the country for its prices.

In 2006, a former Florida state prisons chief and another prison official pled guilty to accepting \$130,000 in kickbacks from a Keefe subcontractor that handled the company's financial transactions.

In 2019, Keefe agreed to a \$3.1 million settlement with Mississippi's attorney general after being accused with other companies of channeling bribes and kickbacks to the former commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections five years earlier. He was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The company was not criminally charged in either case.

Over the years, Keefe has also been criticized by incarcerated people and advocates for charging high prices in states including Florida, Vermont, Michigan, Idaho, Arizona and California.

Two months ago, a man formerly incarcerated at the Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles filed a lawsuit against the county and its sheriff's department to prevent them from renewing contracts with private jail service providers like Keefe that allegedly charge detainees "extortionate and outrageous prices."

Keefe did not respond to a list of detailed questions about its history and its Rikers and Vernon Bain operations.

Asked if correction officials were aware of the allegations against Keefe or the company's full history, Rocchio, the department spokesperson said, "The Department based its initial decision to work with Keefe on its working relationship with us over the years and that they have worked in similar capacities throughout New York State and the nation."

### \$5.63 FOR A BAG OF CANDY

Despite the fixed prices specified in the contract, every Keefe product offered on the website cost 20% more than those listed — with some items 50% higher, an analysis by THE CITY shows.

Starburst candy, for example, is being sold for \$5.63 for a 7.2 oz bag on Keefe's Access Securepak website, while the contract lists it at \$3.75.

## STIFF PRICES, UNFULFILLED ORDERS | Continued from page 5

Products produced by Keefe, as well, are selling for higher prices than those listed in the contract. The company's Brushy Creek 5-ounce Pulled Chicken in Buffalo Style Sauce is sold through Securepak for \$6.79 when the agreed-upon contract price is \$4.95.

When asked about the price increases, correction department spokespeople maintained they authorized increases only on certain items, citing supply-chain issues and a five-cent increase in the price of stamps.

As to the overall price disparity with neighborhood shops, Rocchio said the Department of Correction believes that all the prices are "equal and fair" when compared with local store prices.

"The current prices being offered are comparable to local NYC area stores including supermarkets," he said. "For example, a commissary top seller, ramen noodles are 60 cents for a 3oz bag. Top Ramen Chicken Noodle at Food Bazaar (a NYC area supermarket) cost 67 cents for a 3oz bag."

But Food Bazaar's price list shows that Top Ramen is offered for 57 cents if bought in six- or twelve-packs, and a single 3oz bag of Maruchan brand ramen sells for 40 cents.

The store also sells other items at cheaper prices than those at Rikers commissary. Keefe offers Nutrigrain cereal bars to detainees for 75 cents through the commissary system, and to family and friends for 81 cents on the Access Securepak website. Food Bazaar charges 56 cents. Similarly, a three-ounce package of Ritz Original crackers that sells for \$3.98 on Keefe's website is \$3.19 at Food Bazaar.

THE CITY also visited the closest grocery store to Rikers Island, the Trade Fair Deli & Supermarket on 21st Avenue and 80th Street in Astoria, Queens, and found that 20 of the 22 items checked can be purchased more cheaply there than on Keefe's online website.

A 1.41-ounce package of Goya Con Azafrán seasoning is priced at \$3.68 on Keefe's Securepak website. At Trade Fair the price is \$1.89 and at Food Bazaar it's \$2.19. (Seasonings are a valued product in jails because they give detainees the opportunity to liven up bland jail food and make it their own.) A Sugar Twin sweetener box with 100 packets, sold for \$4 through Access Securepak, costs \$1.99 at Trade Fair.

The drugstore chains present in scores of New York neighborhoods also undersell the commissary, in one case by 300%. At the Rikers commissary, Wet n Wild lipstick is listed for \$7.10 in the contract. It's \$1.89 at

CVS. A 6-ounce tube of Ultra Brite Advanced Whitening Toothpaste sells to inmates for \$2.50 and for \$1.69 at Walgreens.

Many items offered by Keefe can't be compared to those in retail stores because at least 43% of the products the company offers are brands that it produces and packages itself, according to an analysis by THE CITY of the products' trademarks.

Even the two vending machines in an area where Rikers visitors are sometimes initially searched sell items for less. A 1-ounce package of Jack Link's Beef Tender Bites costs \$2.75 at the vending machine, but \$3.83 on the Access Securepak website.

Tasheira Jones used the Access Securepak website twice to send snacks to detainees but was shocked at the cost. "The prices are ridiculous," Jones said. "They are gouging. How can they be more expensive in jail than out here on the streets?"

The complaints among those interviewed by THE CITY went on from there. "I ordered some things through the website but he never got them, so I called the company, the Keefe Group, and asked for a refund, but still nothing," said Danika Palmer, speaking of her husband who has been held at Rikers since February and whose name she asked to be withheld out of fear of retribution.

Something similar happened to Bavarly Arzu, who ordered food for his brother Gerson Arzu through the Keefe website three times. Only two of the orders were delivered, he said. "There is no system in place to complain or get refunds, you just have to keep paying for those overpriced items and pray that he gets them," Arzu said.

Rocchio said there is a grievance system open to users of the commissary and Securepak and that the number of complaints — 1,600 — was relatively small, and most were made in the early days of the system. He added that even though incarcerated people are informed of the balance in their accounts when they place their orders, the primary reason their packages aren't delivered is that the system still allows them to make purchases beyond their available funds.

## FROM \$7 MILLION TO \$33 MILLION

The proposed \$33 million renewal of the Keefe contract was posted last week on PASSPort, the City's digital procurement platform, a few days after the Correction Department announced that it was cutting \$17 million in contracts paid to five nonprofit organizations that provide social services and programs to people in and



## STIFF PRICES, UNFULFILLED ORDERS | Continued from page 6

leaving jails.

Commissioner Molina and his staff maintain the social services work can be done better, and cheaper, by in-house staff than by contracting the work out.

As with all no-bid agreements between city departments and their vendors, the new Keefe contract has to be approved by the Mayor's Office of Contract Services, the Office of Management and Budget, and the city's Law Department. Comptroller Brad Lander's office is also required to ensure there's money in the budget to pay for the contract and there was no fraud in the awarding. Lander's office said it has yet to receive a copy of the new Keefe contract.

After THE CITY presented Lander's office with its findings on the current contract, Chloe Chik, a

spokesperson for the comptroller, released a statement saying: "The Department of Correction signed a contract that specifies certain prices for commissary items with Keefe Commissary Group and should enforce those terms to protect detained New Yorkers and their families from price gouging."

Rocchio said the new contract will include changes. "There will be more definitive language in the new contract around when and how prices can be adjusted," he said.

For some people with family members at Rikers, though, it's irrelevant whether the company wins the contract renewal or not. "I'm never ordering from there again," said Danika Palmer, who said she's still waiting for a refund on the gift package her husband didn't receive.

## BOOK CLUB RETURNS! UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN VISIONS | MAPS

Over the past few years, we (MAPS) have been running a book club via *The Opening Statement*. We select a set of texts, individuals can write in for free copies of those texts, and they can choose to write response essays or to engage in correspondence about the texts with a designated pen pal. The program was temporarily paused, but is beginning once again!

Our next set of readings will be:

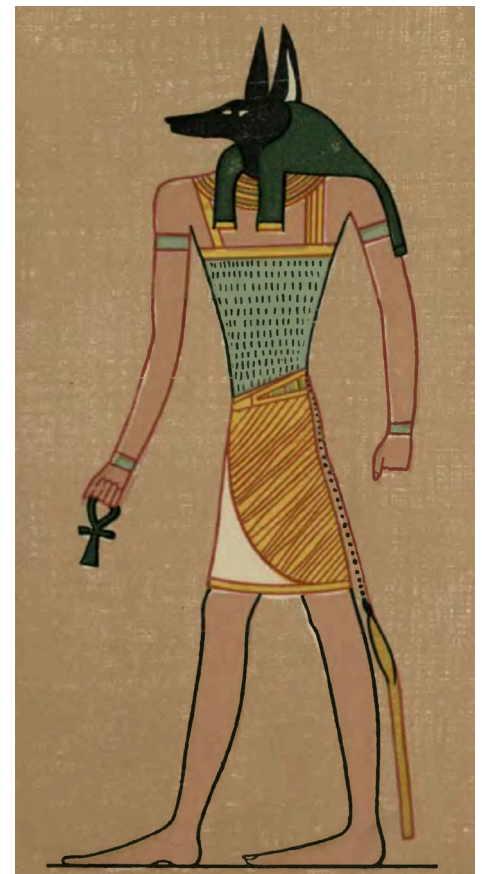
- *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris: The narrator of this utopian novel from the late nineteenth century awakens in a post-revolutionary future following the fall of capitalism. In this imagined future, private property has been eliminated, and all work cooperatively and find true pleasure in their labor.
- *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072* (2022) by M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi: Composed of fictional interviews with key figures in an imagined post-revolutionary future, this novel describes the economic collapses, climate catastrophes,

international conflicts, and organized struggles that led to the fall of capitalism and allowed for the reorganization of society.

As you read, you might consider connections and distinctions between the ways these two novels think about revolution, pleasure, utopia, the role of violence in political change, and labor. These novels were published more than one hundred years apart from one another. What is similar about the ways in which they envision radical political change and an ideal future, and how are their visions distinct? How do these texts think about community, connection, or the role of marriage and the family? How do they approach the concept of gender? How do they conceptualize an ideal relationship to the natural world? How do they seem to feel about work?

If you are interested in receiving free copies of these books, please write to: MAPS, PO Box 8011, Ann Arbor, MI 48107. If you send us a response or a review of the books, let us know if you'd like it to be shared publicly in some way (maybe as a zine or blog post). Unfortunately, we

can no longer print these responses in the newsletter, due to MDOC's censorship of prisoner writings. We are trying to be creative about other ways to circulate these writings and create opportunities for dialogue.



## TRIBULATIONS OF THE MARCH FROM THE INSIDE | Kenneth

My first Study and Struggle group consisted of twelve men. Of the multiracial group, seven were Black, three white (me included), and two Mexican. Since then, the group has fluctuated from numbers as high as 37 to as low as 15, due to outside influences, pressure from gangs, fear, and even transfers.

When I first started the group we were all very nervous, differing in many ways other than race. Some of the guys were intellectual, others could hardly read or write, but most notable were the many differences of opinion. In my eyes, this was the perfect group with every opportunity to build a foundation. We were all imperfect, but together we would become something special.

My first task as group leader was to keep conversations peaceful and on topic, knowing when to listen and when to speak, when and where to guide the conversation(s) to, and most importantly, showing respect to your fellow man despite the differences of opinion. I began by speaking on 'uncomfortable' topics such as race and sexuality. I led by example, encouraging guys to speak out, to vent if necessary. As they began to speak (seeing that the environment was judgment-free and safe), momentum began to build and the group began to speak and come together. It was a beautiful sight to see, people with so many differences coming together, smiling, laughing, understanding one another, so patient, and at times so very serious and passionate.

I could almost compare it to a room full of lawmakers, so many different people coming together for a single cause, a single purpose. Laugh if you will, but it's true. I could feel the pride flowing through me at this point and I knew I was in the right place with our group. This is where I belonged, with our group. My group is my family and I would want to be

with these guys no matter where we are on earth.

Don't get me wrong, there were many times when the group was challenged with violence (such as fights) and called fakes, fa\*\*ots, and phonies. We were even called to the warden's office one at a time and questioned thoroughly. We were asked if we were being influenced from the outside to join a terrorist cell, were we being taught how to write in 'code,' do we love America, etc. It took some convincing, but once the warden realized we were no terrorist group, he let us go back to our zones. However, the damage was done. Guys in the group were scared and wanted no trouble.

All of this blew my mind. My group was panicking and assuming the worst things, such as physical abuse from the guards. I had to act quickly or I was going to lose the entire group. I had to say something. It took every bit of strength inside me to find all of the right words. I just said what was on my heart. I said: "Don't you understand that this is what standing up for what is right is about? Here it is. This is repression live and in person. You're living it right now. And it takes a lot of courage." Then I asked them, "How does it make you feel?" I finished by telling my group that this is why we do this, so that one day we won't have to feel like this anymore."

As a group, we meet twice a week. Individually we hang out every day to show unity, strength, and togetherness despite our many differences. This is one way of saying "it works" and "you can too," to all of the curious eyes on the outside looking in. We defy hatred and its revolving cycle.

It would be misleading to leave you thinking that all we do is "group up." Here is a typical week: On Monday, we split up, passing out flyers that

we've created, collectively explaining about our Study and Struggle (SaS) group, what we bring to the table, and inviting others to 'visit' our group, and challenging them to vent, and to further the challenge by coming back to the group for more. Tuesdays we pass out educational books such as *The Nation on No Map, Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, and *Assata Taught Me*. This opens the doors, piques their interest, and allows them to relate. Along with the educational books we put together and pass out "aid packages" with group money we've gathered collectively. These packages contain: socks, coffee, and various hygiene items. On random days, we wrap candy with quotes such as "I Have a Dream/MLK 1963," "We will no longer contribute to our own oppression," and "organize, organize, organize." These open the eyes and raise questions of the ones that so often lower their heads and walk on by. This is to take the sadness from their hearts and replace it with happiness and purpose. Finally, at the end of the week, we come together and talk about all of this: people we've spoken to, what was said and experiences shared. I always make sure to ask them: "How did it make you feel?"

We are trained in these tough, violent prison environments not to show our feelings, that it is a show of weakness. In our group, we believe that showing feelings is a show of strength, self-security, and courage. You have to feel good about what you do. You have to believe. Our group has faced adversity and violence from all sides (prisoners and guards), but we stand together, today and every day. Here we are. It starts with a mustard seed.

Thank you for allowing me to share this with you and thank you for taking the time to read our group's story: a story of survival, a story of stress and struggle. May you all be strong, never quit, and as always, stay safe.



# (SUPER) MAXED OUT: THE DEMISE OF ALABAMA PRISONS | Kriston Dowdell

June 26, 2023, Scalawag Magazine

*Scalawag Editor's note: This essay is a detailed, first-hand account of the present conditions of Alabama prisons from the perspective of a currently incarcerated individual. This account is written against the backdrop of the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) upcoming trial, which stems from the federal lawsuit filed in response to the unconstitutional conditions found in the 2020 DOJ investigation of the state's men's prisons.*

*These findings, which allege ADOC has failed to protect incarcerated folks from inmate-on-inmate violence, sexual abuse, and excessive use of force from prison staff and to provide safe conditions of confinement, support the narratives and actions from the inside that have become the target of state repression.*

*...Governor Kay Ivey signed a reform polic(e)y in which measures to standardize the state's "good time" polic(e)y that has, among other things, standardized the definitions of low, moderate and high-level offenses and disqualified even more prisoners from opportunities for sentence reduction as a reward for "good behavior." ...*

*In addition, the governor is pursuing the construction of two 4,000-bed mega prisons to replace the facilities that state investigations have deemed beyond repair. Ivey has recently requested the addition of state education surplus funds, to the existing \$1.3 billion already allocated to the construction budget—\$400 million of which include federal COVID-19 relief funds. The testimony here joins the voices of dissent that have been blowing the whistle on the conditions in Alabama prisons and its larger carceral apparatus which boasts deteriorating physical conditions, along with the near-complete decay*



*of its parole, health care, and other "justice"-serving infrastructures. Kriston Dowdell's account, when combined with the long history of struggle against the brutality of the Alabama carceral state, makes a far more than sufficient case for the abolition of the entire apparatus. /*

I am a first-timer in prison. I know you hear a lot about the prisons from people outside—the general public, lawmakers, etc.—but this is the true version, straight from the inside. We can't be silenced anymore. We have to take action and make a change.

Alabama prison facilities are really, really old and lack adequate space to hold the crowds of new inmates that are coming in today. This is because they were built at a time when prisons were designed to hold inmates for short periods of time, as these people were only meant to be contained until they were rehabilitated. At some point, the focus shifted from rehabilitation to

simply housing inmates. In other words, the new objective of the Alabama prison system is to hold them in prison as long as possible and find new ways to make money off of them at the same time.

Prisons in this state are often built in communities where they hire a lot of local workers, who survive off of the prison at the expense of the inmates, because it is the only job around. The Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) leverages the money and legal orders thrown at them from "successful" prison reform policies to hire more correction officers, yet when they do, the new COs don't stay long. When they see the long hours, short pay, and the risk to themselves, they get out quick; trust me, I've seen plenty come and go. The true question is, how can the state build a supermax prison in Alabama, without first securing sufficient staff to run it? The Alabama Department of Corrections has no foundation, so why waste money you don't have?

## (SUPER) MAXED OUT: THE DEMISE OF ALABAMA PRISONS | Continued from page 9

The food in Alabama prisons is both terrible and served in such small portions, I wonder whether or not the state thinks it's serving elementary school children, as these rations are not enough to feed a grown man. I often see inmates with no money trying to go back for seconds because they are hungry and can't afford to buy food from the commissary store. They get thrown out of the kitchen and sometimes get hit by the officers or fellow inmates. I have personally had a dinner tray slapped out of my hand for trying to take an additional serving and was punished by not being allowed to eat anything that night....

In the event of an overdose, the inmates are responsible for rescuing each other. They have to run and get the stretcher, pull the person experiencing the overdose out of bed, and run them to health care. They have to do this, as most are not breathing and have to be brought back to life with a Narcan shot.... The officers are supposed to protect us, right? Wrong. If you are attacked or think you could be attacked by another inmate, don't wait for an officer to arrive. You'll be dead by then.

...With the staff shortages they are having, now they stretch out the officers they have got. The COs work long hours, and sometimes one officer is tasked with watching over two whole dorms with an average 248 inmates in each dorm. On the higher end, overcrowded dorms reach as high as 320 inmates in a dorm, a number that is approved despite the prison employing only handful of officers in the entire facility on some days and nights. This not only puts inmates and staff in danger, but it also causes health care and nursing staff to have lots of turnover.

Alabama has a bad track record of caring for mental health patients, so

for decades they have been sending the "mentally ill" to prison. Here, patients are subject to care under ADOC, where the facilities have limited resources available to help and the inmate-patients are left in the care of officers, who are untrained in the field of mental health. They only know how to use brute force to get the inmates in line.

For years, we inmates would run to the TV every time we heard the Alabama state legislature was going to hold a special session regarding prison conditions. Of course these sessions would go absolutely nowhere because Alabama does not wish to rehabilitate and let their inmates go; their goal remains to make money off of every inmate for as long as possible.

This is evident in the case of the Alabama parole board. At present, the number of people getting paroled out any more has dwindled significantly. If 100 people go up for parole, only five might make it out. The Alabama prison system is set up like a hotel chain: it only makes money when the rooms are booked, and profits are best when it is filled to capacity; If it is empty, then it's not making any money. The federal government has been going back and forth with the state of Alabama for years, threatening lawsuits, giving ultimatums.

Despite these horrific conditions, Governor Kay Ivey is hell-bent on building two supermax prisons in Alabama. That would be her legacy. If successful, the state will try to fill these facilities up just as quickly, which will only produce the same problems over and over again. The governor tried to use funds diverted from the Federal Stimulus money given to the State to fight coronavirus to build these new prisons. This is just wrong.

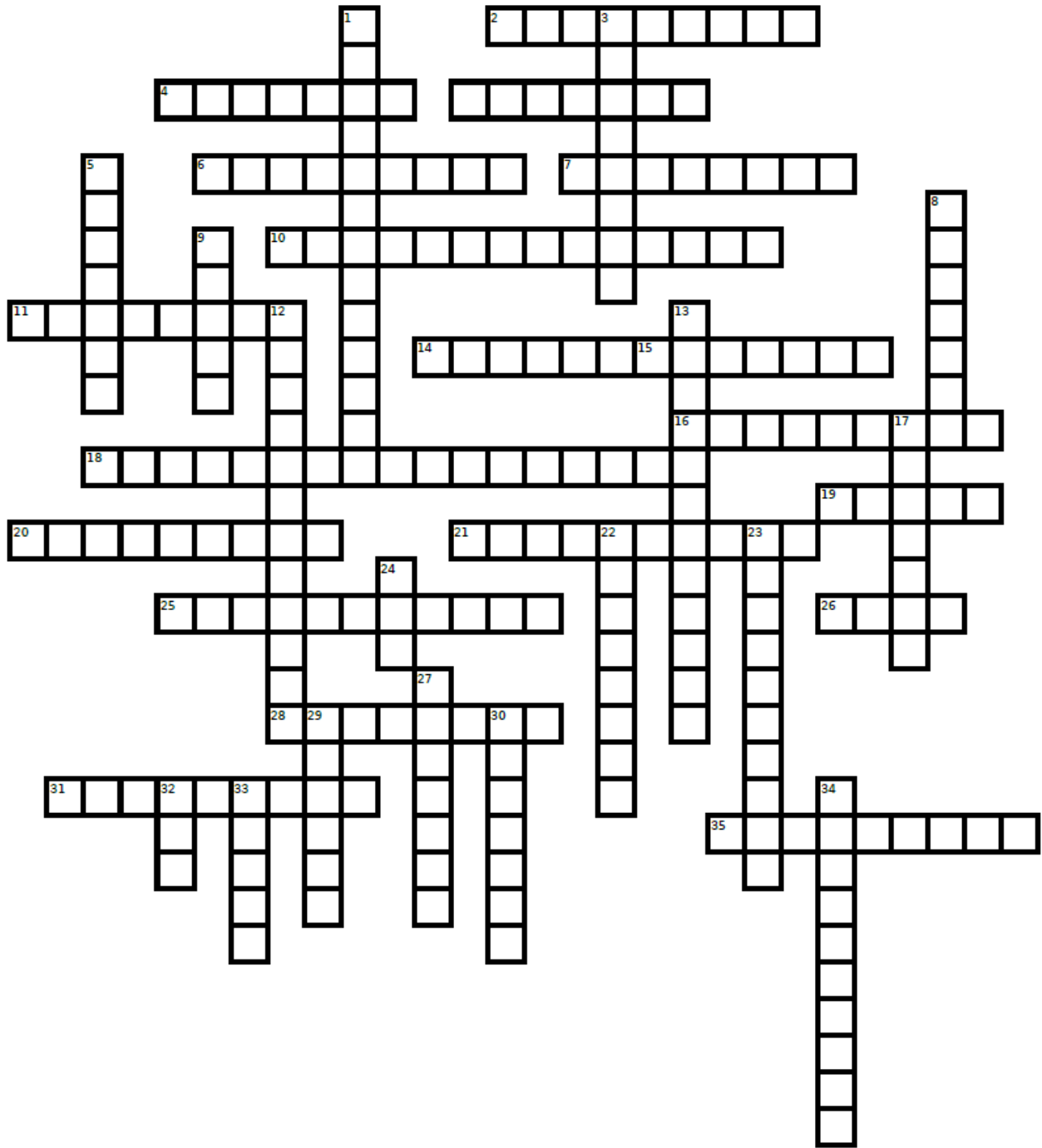
Finally, the Department of Justice sent some people, "representatives," down to the Alabama prisons to take a look around, and to personally talk to the inmates face-to-face, one-on-one, without being afraid. Hopefully, this will help out in their lawsuit against the Alabama Department of Corrections, because it is hopeless down here. There needs to be a national spotlight put on what is going on in the prison system here in this state.

## CROSSWORD PUZZLE

### Down

1. Detroit-based Chinese American Marxist and activist
3. An imaginary place or state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression, or terror
5. Proposed police training facility in Georgia that "will never be built"
8. Simple or severe; lacking anything that makes life easier or more pleasant
9. Corporation recently busted for price gouging commissary in NYDOC
12. A political movement to end oppressive institutions like slavery and prison and liberate people everywhere
13. Michigan National Guard's pet project
17. "Godfather of Punk," born and raised in Ypsilanti
22. Publication that shares stories of "oppressed communities in the South to disrupt and shift the narratives that keep power and wealth in the hands of the few"
23. "Little turtle" in Spanish
24. "Secure\_\_\_"
27. Leonard \_\_\_ - Native American political prisoner falsely accused of murdering two FBI agents at the 1975 Pine Ridge shootout
29. An imaginary community or society that possesses highly desirable qualities for its members

# CROSSWORD PUZZLE | MAPS



30. "He \_\_\_\_ of this joint yesterday."

32. The Greatest of All Time

33. Another term for solitary confinement

34. Author of *Black Skin, White Masks*

## Across

2. *Marmota monax*

4. A prison senior (2 words)

6. A muscular and solitary mammal with the scientific name *Gulo gulo* - also a Marvel character

7. A brand of noodle soup (2 words)

10. The flavor base of cajun and creole cooking (celery, green bell peppers, and onion) (3 words)

11. "U aRe Fucked"

14. Author of *Blood in My Eye*

15. Location of the first prison built in Michigan

16. Another name for Israel

18. A law that makes Michigan prisoners do some of the longest sentences in the country (3 words)

19. Does not consume any animal products

20. Language of origin of the word "Michigan"

21. Worst Spokesperson Ever

25. Location of surprise uprising in Michigan in 2020

26. The Malicious Demons of Coercion (acronym)

28. Seasonal wild berry that grows on trees

31. The Celery City (also Paper City)

35. A bag of this costs \$5.63 at Rikers

*Answer Key: page 12*



