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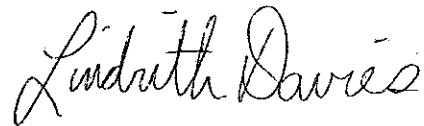
To the Editor:

Your article, "In New York State, Prisoners Work or Else," (Jan. 27) paints an exceedingly one-sided picture of the issue of prison labor. Although "Some segments of the public" feel that prison life has become too easy, segments of the public can be found to support all sorts of crazy things. The article makes no case for prison life having become too easy.

Why, indeed, if they are being provided with education and marketable skills, would any inmates want to refuse to work? Could it be that they resent being paid a maximum of 65¢ an hour for work that would command at least \$10 an hour on the outside? It is not clear why, as Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin III says, "Inmates have the responsibility to help support the cost of their incarceration." Was that financial responsibility stipulated in their sentences? Is it legally part of the due penalty for their crimes? Or does it constitute the imposition of an additional penalty, outside the law? The maintenance of its penal system has long been seen as the responsibility of the state.

We bash corporations for moving abroad to take advantage of cheap labor, but is that not exactly what the State is doing here? Moreover, many, possibly most, inmates have dependents or struggling families on the outside. Perhaps it would wreak havoc for inmates to have so much money to spend within the prison walls, but that is no good argument for denying them the fair value of their labor. Escrow accounts could be set up, or inmates' wages could be sent to their families.

Perhaps, however, if this just step were to be taken, it would force our state governments to take a hard look at the policy of simply building more and bigger prisons. Attempting to make prisons self-supporting by taking advantage of exploited prison labor is immoral, and a very dangerous policy.



Lindrith Davies