

Vidal Guzman in conversation with Chris Pandza on prison wages and forced labor
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Pandza I wanted to know more about if you have an earliest memory of this specific form of forced labor. How did this come to your attention?

Guzman I remember my time in Green Haven Correctional Facility and Riverview in New York State. Green Haven is a youth facility where the majority of the kids are 16 to 24, doing maybe 7 or 8 years. Riverview was literally close to the Canadian border. One of the things I learned was about picking programs—jobs or whatever programs I needed to do while inside.

When you're in a facility doing time, they want you to pick a vocation and a job. At both places, I was forced into this. I'd heard stories of people saying, "They're gonna send you here," and I'd say, "How can they send me here when I have a choice of my own?" They'd respond, "You're in prison. You don't have no choice. There is no freedom, bro." I was like, "Alright, cool"—until I actually sat down in front of a correctional officer and he told me the jobs he was going to put me in. He didn't give me a choice to say what I wanted to do. He said, "We're going to put you in the mess hall and we're going to put you in masonry vocational, because that's what we have open." I said, "No, I don't want to do that. Call me back in 60 days." He replied, "No, we got to put you on a waiting list and we got to get you ASAP on there."

That personal experience really impacted me. You get paid around 16, 18, probably 20 cents—I don't even remember because it's been so long—but it's literally nothing. When you make your wins for that week, basically working for whatever job is given to you in the facility, I only made like a dollar and fifty cents. Imagine going to the mess hall counting pennies—not physically, but just on paper—writing down, "Okay, I can only get one noodle soup, not a box, one noodle soup and a couple stamps and some toothpaste to clean my teeth."

That story really gets me thinking about others and what they're going through, and how TV and production networks can really take advantage of that, knowing they don't have any power. As movements and organizations, especially directly impacted people coming home, that quote of "we don't forget others, even if we left" is a really important part for us as organizers. We have to keep coming back to keep freeing our people.