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Once again dozens of California lawmakers will enjoy a few days on Maui hosted by the California Correctional Peace Officers Association. As our legislators enjoy the vacation, they will also listen to what the guards union has to say on prison matters.

After last year's CCPOA-hosted Hawaiian conference, legislators and Governor Davis approved a six-year contract with the union that was as bounteous as Maui itself: 37% pay increases, a liberalized sick leave policy (that has driven up prison overtime costs dramatically), a policy that allows guards to retire at age 50 with 90% of their salary, and other such lush perks. A state audit has estimated that the contract will eventually cost California taxpayers \$518 million each year.

On January 1, a few weeks after this year's Hawaii bash, a series of changes will begin in our state prisons. As the guards enjoy the fruits of their well-negotiated contract, prisoners and those who care about them, will have visiting days reduced to only Saturdays and Sundays. Families and friends will no longer be able to send in quarterly packages of food (packages will be handled through vendors, resulting in less choice and greater cost), and staffing changes are likely to result in prisoners locked in their cells after 2 PM. Other changes have been put in motion that negatively affect prisoners' jobs, education, and the minuscule number of programs that remain in our post-rehabilitation, just-warehouse-'em, prisons.

What will happen inside when these changes go into full effect? Will prisoners organize, riot, be placated by watching TV? At this point, no one knows. But it's hard to believe increased isolation and frustration will lead to positive outcomes – for prisoners and those who care about them, for officers who proclaim to walk “the toughest beat in the state,” or for all of us in the outside world to which most prisoners will one day return.

In fact, from the point of view of this tax-paying citizen, it is almost as though the Department of Corrections is intentionally creating the conditions that will result in the very opposite of its stated goal of protecting public safety. One can only wonder if this is planned: worsened conditions leading to prison violence leading to the proclaimed justification for more prison jobs and controls.

Which brings us back to the CCPOA. In an on-line newsletter, the union's president, Mike Jimenez, writes: “...when state negotiators recently begged us to give up a little bit, after all the other bargaining units were ‘compromising,’ we said NO.” We've got a budget crisis here, but okay, a good union works for its members. “Make no mistake,” Jimenez writes to his “*peace* officers, “our swords and shields are at the ready, and we've never been more prepared to fight.”

And this fight is not only one for the best possible pay package, but also a battle to influence public policy. Trips to Maui and \$1.1 million in political contributions during the 2002 election cycle, have helped the CCPOA succeed in blocking legislation that, for example, would have allowed the attorney general (rather than locally elected district attorneys) to investigate and prosecute abusive guards. The CCPOA buses scores of crime victims to Sacramento to speak to their legislators each March. The union has worked for passage of the strictest Three Strikes laws and other “lock-em up and throw away the key” legislation.

On the other end of the power spectrum, handfuls of citizens – mostly people with loved ones in prison – have begun meeting in an attempt to share with the politicians who represent them the impact of current and proposed prison changes. These few men and women don’t have money to hire lobbyists or contribute to politicians; no one’s paying for them to meet, organize, and get to Sacramento.

However, assuming that each of the 160,000 men and women in California prisons has at least one person on the outside concerned for his or her welfare, inmates’ friends and family – voters and taxpayers – potentially have more than five times the clout of the CCPOA. No trips to Maui, but perhaps its time for politicians to listen to *this* voting block.

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