An uncertain road to reintegration

At the Melun detention centre, over a hundred prisoners work in the printshop and metal workshop. Here they learn useful trades for when they leave prison. However, wages are very low and labour rights are patchy.

Arthur Frayer
Journalist

Photos by Sadak Souici – Agence Le Pictorium
In the printshop

On this Tuesday morning in January, it is arctic cold and, in the prison yard at Melun, puddles of water have frozen in places. It is also rather nippy in the prison’s vast workshops. Prisoners and guards are wearing hats, polo-neck jumpers and sleeveless bodywarmers to keep the cold at bay.

One of the prisoners, Pascal, who is 59 years old, is wearing a large black fleece jacket and thick tracksuit bottoms. He is busy at work on the printshop’s digital press, which is a huge printer on which just about anything can be printed. “It’s mad how much work I’ve got to do this morning”, Pascal says, although he says it with a smile on his face. He is in fact quite content with all this work as it reminds him of life outside. He has worked on the digital press for two years.

Pascal has light-coloured eyes and little hair. He adds: “I’ve got 1 500 copies of an 88-page catalogue to print! It’s rare to have such large orders”. Ordinarily he prints business cards, greetings cards or court summonses.

Today’s order is particularly special because it’s the catalogue of the Régie industrielle des établissements pénitentiaires or “Riep”: in short, it’s the catalogue of the prison services. Prisoners and guards are wearing such large orders”. Ordinarily he prints business cards, greetings cards or court summonses.

Today’s order is particularly special because it’s the catalogue of the Régie industrielle des établissements pénitentiaires or “Riep”: in short, it’s the catalogue of the prison services. Prisoners and guards are wearing suits, ties and ties. They are busy at other machines. Among them, Dominique Bécret, the lieutenant in charge of prison work at Melun. But there is still significant room for improvement. Most of the prisoners in France, only one-third had regular work in 2016 according to data from the prison authority.

The Melun prisoners work every day from Monday to Friday, from 7 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., which is 6.5 hours of work per day and 32.5 hours per week. This is almost equivalent to a full-time job on the outside. Wages, however, are not on a par with the outside. The "seuil minimum de rémunération" or minimum level of remuneration, which is the official title for the prisoner pay scale, is 4.51 euros gross per hour, whereas the minimum wage for a worker in France is 10.03 euros gross.

Depending on the length of time spent in prison and the post that the prisoner holds, wages can be up to 6.82 euros gross per hour, but that’s the maximum. “We are trying to bring wages into line with ordinary law”, says Dominique Bécret, the lieutenant in charge of prison work at Melun. But there is still significant room for improvement. Most of the prisoners earn between 400 and 800 euros gross every month.

A few steps away from the printshop is the metal workshop, which is the other main employer in the prison. Sixteen prisoners work here, five days a week, converting flat sheets of metal into table legs, cupboard doors or metal boxes.

Didier, who is 52, has worked here as a welder since June 2016. Today he is busy welding metal boxes designed to be used as cell doors.

The employment rate at Melun – nearly two-thirds of prisoners – is quite exceptional for France and the detention centre stands out as an exception.
intercoms in prisons: "I was a welder previ-
osely, which is why I took on the same job here". He says that he earns around 700 euros
gross, from which nearly 200 euros are taken
for pension contributions".

One of his colleagues, Jacques, 44, who
has greyed temples and is a computer de-
signer in the metal workshop, estimates that
he earns 450 euros gross per month. Once
his contributions are paid, "it leaves me with
around 600 euros in my pocket". He uses this
to buy "fresh products", i.e. eggs and milk in
the main, "and also a few books."

A portion of the wage earned is also de-
ducted to reimburse those parties claiming
damages who must be compensated by the
prisoner. Nicolas from the printshop gives
"around 150 euros" a month to the people
he compensates. As soon as a prisoner earns
more than 200 euros, a portion is deducted.
This is done automatically without the pris-
oner having any say.

The money earned in prison is also used
to help family on the outside. "Jacquot" from
the printshop sends a large part of what he
earns to his family outside: "My wife travels
800 kilometres every month to come and see
me. It costs a lot in petrol and motorway tolls,
so I've got to help her". Conversely, other pris-
oners can only rely on what they earn them-
Iseves. "They are sometimes completely cut
off from their family and friends, depending
on the type of crime committed. In those cas-
es, there is no one to send them any money", explains Dominique Bécret, the lieutenant in
charge of the work.

In addition to the low wages, there are huge
disparities in terms of labour rights: no em-
ployment contract; no benefits for techni-
cal unemployment, sick leave or workplace
accidents. There is also no occupational
health or trade union representation.

An ordinary day

In the morning, every prisoner has his lit-
tle routine before heading off to work in the
workshops. "It's like being on the outside, ex-
cept that you're inside", says Patrick, the guy
who makes the seals. He lives alone in his cell
and he is not allowed to have anything coming
from the outside. He discreetly says that many have
"complicated journeys through life". This
means "family problems", "problems with al-
cohol and sometimes drugs". One day he saw
a 47-year-old man arrive at the prison; he had
never worked in his life. "Many have their first
experience of work in prison".

With the advent of digitisation, some tasks
still carried out in the prison printshop

Jacques from the metal workshop is
woken at 5.30 a.m. "by Cevans, which comes
on by itself". He has programmed his TV to
wake him. "I watch the news". Then, when he
returns from his shower, he switches to Ca-
nal 23 and listens to BFM Business while he
drinks his tea.

Didier normally makes himself a coffee
using the Senseo machine set up in his cell.
Except for this morning: "I had washing to
hang up, so I didn't have time for coffee". At
6.45 a.m. everyone is ready to head off
to work. "You have to wait at your cell door",
says Patrick. That's when the loudspeakers in
the corridor crackle into life: "Go to the work-
shops". Patrick and the other guys from his
floor come out into the corridor and wait for a
guard to open the floor gate. They walk through
the prison's silent and frozen yard. At this time
in the morning, there are only muffled sounds
coming from the surrounding town.

Once in the workshops, the prisoners
stamp their time cards. The workshop super-
vizer ticks off on his sheet who is there and
writes in the name of those who are
absent.

Just before, Ahmed Lestal, who is head
of production, arrives in the metal workshop
from outside the prison, with the cold biting
his cheeks. Still wearing his coat, he goes
around the vast workshop switching on the
lights and starting up the machines: "You
have to anticipate. The painting booth takes
time to get to temperature". He also opens
the toolboxes, which are locked so that the
prisoners can't steal anything. The silhouette
of the hammers, pliers and screwdrivers is
drawn on the bottom of the boxes so that he
can be sure that nothing is missing at the end
of the day.

When the first workers arrive, Ahmed
Lestal removes his coat and gets his first cof-
fee of the day, black without sugar. Everyone
goes to their post: Didier the welder switches
on his welding machine and, in the printshop,
Nicolas sits down in front of his computer to
design the mock-ups for future documents to
be printed. The day begins.

At 9.30 a.m. all the workers go for a
break. In the metal workshop, the rest room
is a long, white, bare room where the guys
drink an instant coffee made with water from
the kettle. Here they eat a "snack", as the pris-
on authority calls it: an apple, an orange or
a packet of biscuits. Ahmed Lestal takes his
second coffee of the morning at that point.
But not with the guys: "That's their time".

At 1.30 p.m. it's leisure time. Every-
one goes back to their cell. The "lunch box",
as everyone calls it here, is served at around
2 p.m. in the cells. In the afternoon, the guys
are free to do what they want: stay in their
cells or go for a walk.

The uncertain prospect of integration

For the prison authority, there is a purpose
to making prisoners work in prison: it helps
with their reintegration when they leave,
which is not always easy.

Emmanuel Gandon is head of the Ser-
vice pénitentiaire d'intervention et de probation
(Spip) or Prison service for integration and
probation for Seine-et-Marne, which is res-
sponsible for reintegrating prisoners. His of-
face occupies a vast room without anything on
the walls, just beside the prison canteen. He
is wearing a light scarf knotted at the neck. He
says: "The idea behind work in prison is to get
the prisoners to understand why they are here
and to reflect on what brought them here". He
adds: "Work in prison is about keeping to
working hours, respecting constraints and
obeying management, among other aspects.
This can seem trivial when said like that, but
many prisoners have never worked before end-
ing up here". He discreetly says that many have
had "complicated journeys through life". This
means "family problems", "problems with al-
cohol and sometimes drugs". One day he saw
a 47-year-old man arrive at the prison; he had
never worked in his life. "Many have their first
experience of work in prison".

In addition to the low wages, there are huge
disparities in terms of labour rights.
no longer exist on the outside. The sector is less prosperous than before. In metalworking, on the other hand, the sector is struggling to recruit staff. "For years there has been a huge shortage of labour!", says Ahmed Lestal. "Look at the temporary job adverts: welders, boiler-makers, pipe fitters, and so on; all the firms are looking for them! When they leave here, if they want, guys who have gone through the metal workshop are certain of finding work".

Some prisoners submit a request to be released early. They are entitled to do this once they have served the majority of their prison sentence. Having a promise of a job on the outside is essential.

On this January day, a sentence enforcement board has been meeting within the prison compound, chaired by a sentence enforcement judge (juge d'application des peines – JAP) from Melun court. During the break, the judge says: "Many requests for early release are rejected at Melun because, in most cases, the applications are not complete. They have no accommodation on the outside, or job offers are fictitious. If the firm promising to hire someone has a very limited turnover, you know that they cannot pay the released prisoner. What we should have is more chantiers d'association'. These are cruelly lacking in the region".

Pascal, the digital-press-man at the prison, has already learnt three trades since being imprisoned: graphic designer, audio-visual editor and web developer "using software that mimics the internet because web access is prohibited in prison". Although "Jacquot" works in the printshop, he really hopes to learn a trade "connected with cooking" for afterwards, because he knows that jobs are easy to get in that sector. Nicolas, who is laying out the caterer's menu, is studying for a vocational training certificate in the "creation of communication projects". The most surprising person is certainly Jacques, in the metal workshop, who is in his second year of a master's degree in accountancy.

"Many have their first experience of work in prison."

1. These are worksites that are set up outside prisons by reintegration associations.