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JANUARY 26, 2015

As criminal justice reform edges forward, will public-safety unions get left behind?

 January 3, 2015 by [stevenyoder](#)  [Leave a Comment](#)

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Two officers on strike carry signs with uniformed officers nearby. Baltimore Police

In the last few weeks, the New York police union's [furious criticism](#) of New York Mayor Bill De Blasio has gotten plenty of attention. But even before the Eric Garner episode, another city union had taken a dislike to the mayor—the prison guards union.

That union's ire focused on De Blasio's appointment of Joseph Ponte as his corrections commissioner. Ponte previously ran Maine's correction system, where he focused on better treatment of inmates by reducing the use of solitary confinement, overhauling mental health care, and welcoming advocates and reporters into the prisons, *The New York Times* reported last April. But union head Norman Seabrook told the *Times* that the union opposed Ponte because it favors just the opposite—more solitary confinement and less access by advocates to prisons.

That fits a pattern across the country. In many jurisdictions, police and prison-guard unions have a record of opposing changes in police accountability and prison practices. But as Republicans and Democrats increasingly coalesce around the need for criminal justice reform, unions that fail to get out ahead of the coming wave could find themselves losing ground in the political process.

Conservative politicians are increasingly coming around to the idea that America's record levels of incarceration are neither sustainable nor effective. "We can no longer afford business as usual with prisons," Newt Gingrich wrote in a 2011 op-ed. "The criminal justice system is broken, and conservatives must lead the way in fixing it." Republicans have gone along with Democrats in supporting "smart-on-crime" legislation like the Second Chance Act, passed in 2007 to offer services that help prisoners reenter society. They've also supported the Fair Sentencing Act, passed in 2010 to reduce the disparity in prison terms for possession of crack and powder cocaine. In 2009, movement conservatives Grover Norquist and David Keene testified before a House Judiciary Committee in opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing policies.

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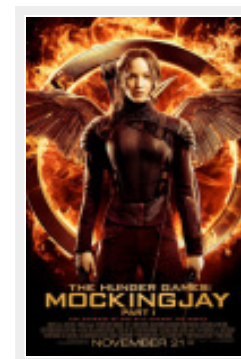
Commentary: For Hunger Games – Mockingjay, teens are doing the marketing

December 4, 2014

By Joan Oleck – The Hunger Games:

Mockingjay—Part 1

is, for its teen fan base, a powerful lesson in marketing manipulation. For anyone not living in a cave, this third film in the series of four is based on the über-successful book series by



But the biggest opponent of closing prisons has been the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents 62,000 corrections officers and 23,000 corrections employees nationally. As *Mother Jones* reported last February, in Illinois, when Governor Pat Quinn ordered the notorious Tamms Supermax prison closed for its brutal treatment of prisoners, AFSCME challenged the order through its legislative allies, stalled it in the courts, and mounted a public campaign to keep it open. And in California, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCOPA) was one of the primary sponsors of the Three-Strikes Law that jammed the state's prisons and led to a federal court ordering the state to cut its prison population.

Similarly, support for police reform across party lines hasn't prevented police union opposition. A December Washington Post/ABC News [poll](#) found that more than three quarters of both conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats support outfitting cops with body cameras and, when officers kill unarmed civilians, requiring an investigation by an independent prosecutor.

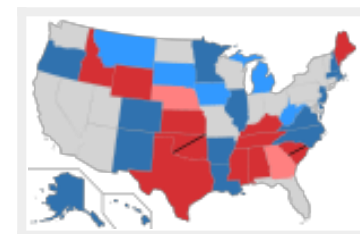
But several local police unions around the country have opposed body cameras. In Miami, when Mayor Carlos Gimenez put forward a body-camera plan this summer, the police union filed a written grievance noting that cameras "will distract officers from their duties, and hamper their ability to act and react in dangerous situations ..."

And when New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman proposed that his office be given the power to investigate and prosecute killings of unarmed civilians by cops, the president of the New York City detectives' union told the *Times* that the proposal "insulted the intelligence and the integrity of the grand jurors who examined the facts" in the Garner case.

Unions also have routinely protected bad cops. In Florida, for example, then-Governor Jeb Bush appointed the head of one of the state's two police unions as chair of the state's Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission, formed years earlier to

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**Commentary:
The 2014 US
Midterms –
The
democratic
election
that wasn't**



November 11, 2014

Commentary: The 2014 US Midterms – The democratic election that wasn't American democracy is predicated on two critical pillars. The selection of political representatives by the majority via the ballot box, and the availability of timely and accurate information that is vital for voters in their assessment of candidates and policies consistent with their self-interest. [...]

**Commentary:
International
community
must address
Myanmar's
mistreatment
of Rohingya
minority at East Asian summit**



October 31, 2014

As Myanmar, a country with an

get rid of bad cops. With one of its own as commission chair, the unions pushed for rules changes that made it harder to discipline officers, according to a 2011 [investigation](#) by the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. That resulted in a 20-percent decline in the number of officers who lost their certifications. Several of the strongest union states—California, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Hawaii, and New York—[don't even have a process](#) for stripping cops of their licenses, even those who commit egregious offenses like having sex while on duty or lying during internal investigations.

Union opposition to reform matters because public-safety unions appear to hold unique power. In Wisconsin, when Governor Scott Walker abolished collective bargaining for that state's public-sector unions, he spared two—police and firefighters. In Illinois, the Republican gubernatorial candidate said last year that he favored moving public-sector unions from defined pensions to a 401K system—except for police and firefighters.

Yet even cops themselves seem to know that changes are needed. The most recent [study](#) of police attitudes toward abuse of authority was done in 2000 by the U.S. Department of Justice. It found that fully 22 percent of more than 900 officers surveyed reported that those in their department “sometimes, often, or always” use more force than necessary in making arrests. (Another 63 percent said “seldom” in response to the question). And fully 15 percent said that officers in their department “sometimes, often, or always” respond to verbal abuse with physical force.

Should police and prison unions fail to respond to calls for change, the real victim could be the unions themselves. Already critics of public-sector unions like former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan have [called for](#) police unions' abolition. Those demands could increase should union leaders fail to propose changes that both treat officers fairly and protect those they serve.

incipient democracy and alarming human rights record, prepares to host a prestigious regional issues summit in coming weeks, the Southeast Asian nation's galling treatment of its ethnic minority populations is receiving renewed attention. It's an inopportune time for the country's president, Thein Sein, for these issues to be resurfacing in [...]


Commentary:
Bandwagon outrage over Brunei's strict Islamic criminal code all but gone



October 18, 2014

When Brunei became the first Southeast Asian country to nationally adopt a strict Islamic penal code known as Sharia earlier this year, the world was outraged. News and social media told us so in such headlines as “Brunei adopts sharia law amid international outcry” and “Ellen DeGeneres backs boycott of Brunei-owned hotels over ‘stone the [...]”

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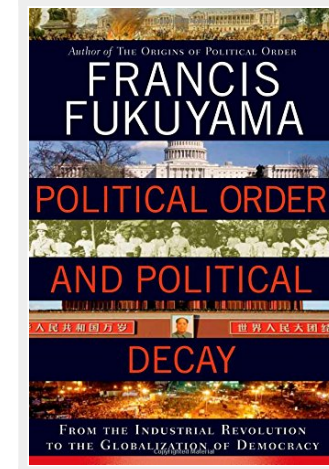
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