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### **Private Prison Operator GEO Group Must Pay Inmates Minimum Wage for Work, Jury Rules**

After a two-and-a-half-week trial, a federal jury decided Wednesday that a for-profit prison company must pay its workers the state minimum wage of \$13.69. The court found that GEO Group, a private prison operator that runs the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma, Washington, was violating the state's minimum wage laws by only paying its workers \$1 per day. The wage violation had been occurring for over 15 years. The company currently operates 57 correctional or detainee facilities across the United States, in addition to five facilities overseas. GEO Group reportedly uses immigration detainee labor to staff nearly all positions at the Northwest ICE Processing Center besides security. This includes laundry services, food preparation, maintenance and cleaning for the 1,575-bed facility. Workers were also made to "provide thousands of haircuts" at the center's barbershop, the Washington State Attorney General's Office said. The lawsuit, which was originally filed in 2017, stated that the company had been paying its workers a single dollar per day since at least 2005. Workers would occasionally be given extra food in lieu of payment, according to the lawsuit. Additionally, during interviews with the authorities, detainees "described working through the night buffing floors and painting walls in exchange for chips and candy." U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) renewed its contract for the facility in 2015, and GEO Group estimated that a full-capacity center could accrue \$57 million of revenue per year. A U.S. District Court will now examine the case to determine how much money GEO Group gained from the single dollar payments. Arguments are also slated to begin Thursday in a similar class-action suit. Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson praised the decision of the court, and also requested that GEO Group be forced to reimburse both the exploited prisoners and the Tacoma citizens. "This multi-billion dollar corporation illegally exploited the people it detains to line its own pockets," Ferguson said on Facebook. "Today the jury returned a unanimous verdict: We won. GEO must now pay their workers the minimum wage." Ferguson additionally called the court's decision "a major victory for workers' rights and basic human dignity." In a separate statement, the attorney general's office also praised the decision while lambasting the actions of GEO Group, stressing that the detention center was not housing convicted prisoners. "There are no exceptions for private, for-profit facilities like GEO's facility. The people detained there are not criminals, nor part of a treatment or rehabilitation program," the statement said. "In contrast with a jail or prison, which house people involved in the criminal justice system and are operated by state or local governments, the detention center is a for-profit facility that houses people who are awaiting civil immigration proceedings." Attorney General Ferguson has a long history of fighting for civil rights in Washington state. In 2015, he created a special operation, the Wing Luke Civil Rights Division, which helps to enforce both state and federal anti-discrimination laws. This is not the first time that GEO Group has faced legal issues, including another class-action lawsuit filed by Colorado detainees who claimed they were subjected to forced labor. Newsweek has reached out to GEO Group for comment.