

AL, MS Plants Losing 261 Jobs To Prison Labor

The Associated Press

FAYETTE, Ala. (AP) — A company that makes clothes for the U.S. military will shutter plants in Alabama and Mississippi, shedding about 260 jobs total, as federal inmates begin manufacturing the apparel inside prisons.

The Tuscaloosa News reported Wednesday (<http://bit.ly/Uryul1>) that American Power Source will close a plant that employs 119 people in Fayette, located in west Alabama, and another one that employs 142 people in Columbus, Miss.

Cathy Griffith, operations manager for the two factories, said the 261 employees were informed of the decision on Friday. She said the announcement was met with tears and anger.

American Power Source has made military clothing in Fayette since 2001, and it opened in Columbus in 2003. With the loss of the federal contracts, the company will be out of business on Nov. 1 unless the federal government reverses its decision, Griffith said.

"Our government is putting law-abiding, tax-paying citizens out of work," she said.

Ed Ross, a spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, said it wasn't immediately clear where the work would be performed that had been done by employees at American Power Source.

Federal Prison Industries, which operates plants inside federal corrections facilities, is not allowed to sell inmate products to private companies, but it can sell to government agencies. The federal law that created the prison industries requires federal agencies to buy inmate-made items even if they are more expensive than like items made by private companies.

American Power Source isn't the first apparel plant affected by federal inmate labor. On May 31, Selma-based American Apparel, which also makes military clothing, closed its Fort Deposit plant, putting about 175 people out of work. It, too, cited the loss of military contracts.

Fayette Mayor Ray Nelson called it "crazy" to let prisoners claim jobs from the community.

"I am just asking our representatives in Congress and our senators to help us with this," he said. "We have convicted felons taking away jobs from law-abiding citizens."

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